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The Ugly Face of Love

AND OTHER STORIES

Gerald Kersh is back again, this time with eleven stories, each one shot through with the author's unusual brand of cool hysteria.

Gasping and expectant, Mr Kersh's many admirers will follow the experiences of his clutch of fixers, twisters, robbers and dreamers with more than a touch of anxiety and the most hilarious enjoyment. For two million dollars, Karmesin dons a neat, cement suit and unearths a bad Shakespeare sonnet. Dear little Dicky is a half-blind and cherished boy whose speech becomes, overnight, unrestrainedly foul and oddly reminiscent of a famous Montana gangster.

The reader will need little persuasion to let himself be guided, or rather compelled, through Mr Kersh's private labyrinth of comedy and nightmare.

BOOKS BY
GERALD KERSH

NOVELS

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The Nine Lives of Bill Nelson
The Dead Look In
Brain and Ten Fingers
Faces in a Dusty Picture
The Weak and the Strong
Clean, Bright and Slightly Oiled
Night and the City
Sad Road to the Sea
Prelude to a Certain Midnight
The Song of the Flea
Men are so Ardent
The Thousand Deaths of Mr Small
The Brazen Bull
The Great Wash
Fowler's End

SHORT STORIES

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An Ape, a Dog and a Serpent
Neither Man nor Dog
I Got References
Clock Without Hands
The Brighton Monster and Other Stories
Guttersnipe
Men Without Bones and Other Stories
The Ugly Face of Love and Other Stories

GERALD KERSH

The Ugly Face of Love
. AND
OTHER STORIES



HEINEMANN

LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO

Willfam Heinemann Ltd
LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO
CAPE TOWN AUCKLAND
THE HAGUE

Printed in Great Britain
by The Windmill Press Ltd
Kingswood, Surrey

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For
Ida de Heer.
and all true friends in
Covent Garden.

The Shady Life of Annibal

When I first met Bella Barlay face to face, she having for once consented to be interviewed, I wondered what two generations of European connoisseurs could ever have seen in her. My sort of article was of the half-scurrilous, city-slicker, sophisticated type: the sort of thing that, under the guise of urbane reportage, does a taxidermist's job of flaying, stuffing and mounting. We were swift with our used razor-blades and black-headed pins in those days. It was fashionable, generally, to make specimens of those who spared us their time, and we could take a word out of context as neatly as a sandpiper picks a worm out of a beach at low tide.

Moth was the word I mentally noted, in connection with Bella Barlay, when I saw her sitting crouched in a powdery-looking fawn housecoat upon a great brocade sofa in her suite at the Hotel Elégant in London. I even had a brilliant opening paragraph half composed in my mind, the exact content of which I forget; but it would have raised many a curious half-laugh in the dentists' waiting-rooms where my magazine was most widely read.

Then the moth stirred and spread itself, and here was no blundering booby that knocks its head against bright lights and makes itself conspicuous only by its nuisance value. Here was something rare and elusive. I knew then, why grand dukes had offered her marriage, although millions of ordinary women all over the world had clipped her picture from the illustrated papers simply to say to

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their friends: 'I'm not vain, and I know I'm no beauty, but thank goodness I don't look like Bella Barlay!'

Her features were undistinguished, and her face was too narrow. Her skin has been described as 'olive', and so it was – that of a green olive gone dry. Her eyes which were wide-set, were black, round and prominent, while her hair was tossed about rather than dressed. Yet when she smiled her countenance broke into a tantalisingly beautiful mosaic pattern: it made an abstract composition that got at your heart while your baffled intelligence grumbled admiration under protest. And when she talked, I noticed, first, that her voice had the quaint, husky lingering sweetness of a cowbell heard on a misty hill . . . then there crept into it a nostalgic quality, as of something half-lost and crying to come home to memory.

Seeing that I was abashed, Bella Barlay offered me a cup of tea. Her tea-cosy was a queer obus of straw and silk tortuously covered with wooden beads of various shapes and colours. It made the teapot look drunk. Quick to catch my glance she said, 'Ah, that. That was not meant for a tea-cosy, my dear, but for a hat. Grosjean designed it exclusively for me in 1936. I am not in sympathy with male milliners. A man should make roads and bridges, not hats for actresses. This hat came in a box, and the box was in a green paper bag. I was having tea at the time. So I put the hat on the teapot to keep my tea warm, twisted the green paper bag into an intriguing shape and wore it with an emerald. For a week after that, women wore paper hats. You can put that in your article if you like.'

'I love an article with human interest and a touch of the bizarre. Here is another bit of nonsense; when I first went to New York, two of my trunks were misdirected so that I discovered, at the last moment, that I had no evening dress. Now the shower-curtain in my hotel bathroom

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had a charming design of black fishes and white fishes upon a dull yellow ground. The fabric was a kind of oiled silk. I took it off the hooks, draped it upon myself, fastening it with an immense topaz – and it was a sensation. For you see, I am so odd-looking that the preposterous is becoming to me.

‘But you must have your story. You are a lucky boy; I do not like to talk about myself, and I do not like what they call “inside dope”. How many volumes did the greatest of biographers devote to Dr Johnson? And what emerged? A bully and a glutton. And you want to portray Bella Barlay in an *article*?’

Bella Barlay closed her eyes for a few seconds, smiling her provocative, close-lipped, lopsided, triangular smile. Then she said, ‘I think I will tell you how I became an actress. Take it down, if you please. It is an amusing story . . .’ So she told me, in a dreamy, reminiscent manner . . . but she always kept an eye on her watch:

. . . Although I was a born actress, my background is not actually theatrical. My parents were rich, but not otherwise distinguished. I always remember them as a pair of those soft, gentle, pastel-coloured birds that seem to cease to be when you separate them: it is impossible to imagine one alone, they can exist only in couples. Everybody in Budapest liked the Barlays for their sympathy and because they were so genuinely happy together. It did people’s hearts good to see them exchanging their delicate little courtesies and to hear how, so frequently, they spontaneously said exactly the same thing at precisely the same moment. When they did this they would blush slightly, make chains of little-fingers, and make a wish. And of course each wished the other happiness.

The Hungarian – when not otherwise engaged – is a

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sentimental and romantic creature, and so my parents had a wide circle of quite sophisticated friends. Horrid old Dukes, notorious for their cynical dissipations, used to come to drink coffee at our house simply to enjoy the luxury of an afternoon's sugary remorse. 'Ah, if only I could have been like that!' they said; and went away much refreshed to make a wild night of it.

My mother was the only daughter of a wealthy landowner, and my father had inherited a title and a comfortable fortune. They had no earthly cares. Yet it would seem that their bliss was not quite unadulterated. They had been boy-and-girl sweethearts and, during their long and innocent courtship, they had playfully talked about the family they were going to have after they were married. I can see them in my mind's eye, hand-in-hand in a summery garden, playing their pretty little game of make-believe. Do not smile, my friend — there is nothing more deadly serious than a child at play, and nothing that happens to him in later years can ever be so good or true as that radiant dream in the sunlit garden.

They decided, my poor parents, that they were going to have a son. There was, I believe, some battle of flowers about his name, but they agreed at last that he must be called Annibal. He was, as I surmise, to come into the world prefabricated at the age of four in the image of one of the Cupids in the Museum; spring into adolescence looking like somebody or other's statue labelled Youth Holding Dove; and pass gracefully into Apollo (Anonymous). For a year or two before her marriage, Mama was, somewhat to her mother's embarrassment, already talking of little Annibal as if he were well on the way. But to remonstrate with her would have been too much like mocking at a child.

According to my old friend and master, Jean de Luxe,

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my sweet infatuated father was as silly if not more so. The nearest they ever came to an argument was when, six months before their wedding, Papa asked her whether he should send the growing Annibal to Horvath or to LaSalle for fencing lessons. She protested that she would not have her Annibal fighting with swords, and my father argued that it was his Annibal as well as hers – and what if, when Papa was too old to fight, some brute insulted the boy's mother? Good old Jean de Luxe (even the most level-headed of our friends found themselves involved in this silly fantasy) settled the matter by saying to my mother, 'But, my dear, he will have wrists of steel, the eye of a hawk, and will fence like the Three Musketeers.'

- In due course they were married one idyllic day in spring – alas, so long ago! – and all the countryside and half the city danced at the wedding. The health of Annibal Barlay was drunk almost as if it were a christening! And thus this lucky couple went into their dream world in a great radiance, and everybody waited more or less breathlessly for little Annibal.

My grandmother, completely befuddled by this myth, had made a gold christening mug and spoon engraved with the monogram *A.B.*; and even my paternal grandfather, who was supposed to be an astute man, put down a hundred dozen bottles of a very fine Tokay for Annibal's twenty-first birthday. He argued that, in case of accident, he could drink them up himself; but it was easy to see that Annibal had captured his imagination too.

Hence, time went by and my parents' friends began playfully to ask, 'Where's Annibal?' The Hungarians are a romantic people, but they take their nonsense seriously. They hate to be disillusioned, and there is nothing more dangerous than a disenchanted romantic – that is why the Hungarians are always revolutionaries. It was not that my

father was a coward, exactly. He feared nothing but the ice-cold nakedness of exposure to everybody's laughter; for we Hungarians are great jokers, but our jokes are not to be laughed at.

Therefore, after a little while, telling the world that Annibal was to be expected in due course, and pleading my mother's health, he took her to the Italian Riviera – where she and her old nurse Ilonka occupied themselves with tiny garments of china-blue to match Annibal's hypothetical eyes. I may add that Ilonka, a burly peasant woman, who could have balanced my mother on her great hand like a celluloid doll, was already fully convinced of her duty to Annibal, and did a lot of fine sewing for him in advance. Such is the power of suggestion.

Months passed. No Annibal. But – understand me – the less he was, the more he was! Ilonka was convinced that if my mother and father said that there was an Annibal, and her hands encompassed nothing, then *she* was somewhere at fault. At last, one fine evening, while Papa and Mama were at dinner, with a joyous cry, between two spoonfuls of chocolate *mousse*, my mother, laying down her spoon, cried, 'Annibal is here!'

Thereupon Papa wept, and the household was turned upside-down. Ilonka, as my mother's personal nurse, became an intolerable tyrant. It was like Hans Andersen's fairy story about the Emperor's new clothes, with a different twist: the clothes were there, but the Emperor was not. Nobody ever saw such a turmoil of washing and nursing, of disinfecting and window-sealing, of whispering and tiptoeing, for my imaginary brother Annibal in his secret chamber.

Gifts came in: spoons, silver-gilt mugs galore, cashmere layettes, and so forth. Everyone plunged into the spirit of the jest, being half-convinced by now that there must be

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something – some canvas to support all this embroidery
some thread to give shape to this tenuous lacy conception.

So Annibal came into being without ever having been born, and so he grew up. Jean de Luxe has told me – he was a cool old impresario – that, more than once, when my parents talked about the child they hadn't got, he was hard put to it to keep his hands in his pockets for fear that he might applaud, and had to bite his tongue so as not to cry, 'Almost perfect, children! Enough for today! Same time tomorrow!'

This, as you must understand, was before I was born. I am only fifty-nine years of age. Annibal would be nearly seventy by now – if he had ever existed . . . Poor Annibal – ah-ah! You see how easily one slips into the pattern of a tapestry? . . .

Time came when Annibal was old enough to have an English governess and a French tutor – Miss Smythe and M de Mans – who also entered into the spirit of Annibal, but fell in love with each other and ran away to get married together; to my parents' outraged disgust. What would servants think of next? After that, Annibal was sent to school, from where he sent home remarkably intelligent letters, which were quoted, not read. His grandparents remembered his birthdays, when there was generally a celebration, with fireworks; only Annibal was, on such occasions, confined to his bed with an infectious disease – or there was a contagion in the neighbourhood to which it might be dangerous to expose him.

In this smooth, ready-made manner my fictitious brother Annibal reached the age of eleven years. And then something unforeseen happened.

My mother, on her thirtieth birthday, announced to my father that she was, in honest truth, going to present him with a *real* child!

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‘Now there is a considerable difference between an imaginary child and one of flesh and blood. I believe that the English essayist, Charles Lamb, was very eloquent on the subject of Dream Children – diaphanous things that came in imagination into the firelight, when he had taken a little too much gin. Charming. But he should have had me! I was ninety-nine per cent meat and voice, and did not care who knew it. He would have refilled his pipe and dreamed a different dream.’ Furthermore, as far as my mother was concerned, she learned reluctantly that there is a certain inconvenience connected with the bearing and raising of a child, which is on the whole an earthy creature in itself. Call a baby a crock of screams and dreams. Enough.

This real child of my parents was to be born about August, under the sign of Leo the Lion, by which token it was to be dominant and creative. The poet Longfellow was born under Leo, and so was Guy de Maupassant. Mama at once visualised him as a kind of poetic genius of military aspect with a blond moustache; a sort of General Wolfe, quoting Gray’s *Elegy* while attacking the Heights of Abraham. Its name was to be Béla, after one of our national heroes.

Imagine my parents’ horror when, instead of a dream, *I* was born!

Now, with nearly sixty years of poise and *savoir-faire* behind me, I am still nothing much to look at, but as a child, Jean de Luxe assured me, I was like something out of a comic strip. As he said, ‘It is not that I mind frogs, but I find it unnerving when a frog wears a frilly blue bonnet and makes a noise like a cat’ . . . He was my godfather, and a broad-minded man – and he should have known.

I was, on the same authority, an intolerable nuisance,

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subject to all the more exasperating diseases of childhood, such as whooping-cough, croup, thrush, mumps, chicken-pox, tonsilitis, adenoids – anything to offend the sensitive eye and ear – and I had what are now known as allergies. There was no scientific name for them then; it was simply said that such-and-such a thing did not agree with you. I was allergic to feathers, every kind of vegetation, and even to milk, so that, in the lap of luxury, I suffered from malnutrition, got rickets, and had to have irons on my legs for two or three years. My other allergies brought me out in giant hives and sent me into convulsive fits of sneezing. No doubt I suffered; I don't remember. It is certain that my poor parents did. You have, in your time, awakened out of a bright dream like Caliban, and cried yourself to sleep again? So it was with Papa and Mama.

So, as dreamers will, they kept me, the reality, out of sight as much as possible, and comforted themselves with the splendid vision of Annibal. My mother who, like most gentlewomen of her generation, had learned a little lady-like water-colouring, made dream pictures of Annibal in various stages of his development. The artist Laszlo Biro, commissioned to paint a family group, had to add an imaginary portrait of Annibal standing at my father's right hand and holding a book. I appeared as a non-committal bundle of flounced muslin in my mother's lap; in the background, landscape with trees.

Now I am not saying that they, bless them, were in any way unkind to me. It was not in their character to be unkind. Only there was, as far as I was concerned, what the psychologists might call, I think, a mental block: a kind of emotional stoppage. I was less real to them than the enchanted mist which was Annibal. And, do you know, although I was a child of wonderfully quick wit and per-

ception, I was eight years old before I realised that there was no such person as Annibal?

I discovered this terrific fact for myself. Hampered by my weak legs, I was debarred from active play, so I used to make myself as happy as I could in my own cloud cuckoo-land, reading fairy-tales and playing with my dolls of which I had a prodigious family, each one with its own little characteristics. And the dolls became more real to me than my own father and mother – from this, I think, I derived some understanding. Also I had a dog, a great wolf-hound, whom I called Galahad, because he would have fought dragons for my sake. I used to tell Galahad stories, some of which I had read, but the best of which I had got from my dear old nurse Ilonka. She was from the Roumanian border, and could tell a tale.

One night she told me about Zerbin the Woodcutter, who helped a fairy in distress and was, therefore, granted three wishes. Zerbin's first wish was, that his bundle of wood should cut itself; his second, that the sticks should gather themselves together and tie themselves up into a faggot; and his third, that instead of his carrying the bundle home, the bundle should carry him. All went well – stick stuck to stick, a vine came of its own accord and bound a huge faggot which sprouted four legs so that Zerbin could ride home as on a horse. He could have asked for the kingdoms of the earth, but this was the limit of his understanding, do you see? So he straddled his load of firewood like a lord; and now, if you please, it did not run fast enough for him! He cursed it and beat it with the back of his axe – upon which, the spell being broken, the collective bundle of sticks resumed their individualities, the knot in the vine gave way, and Zerbin the fool found himself sitting all alone with everything to do again.

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Now, I find a moral in this story. Then, I liked to think that it was true. So, having caught and released a beautiful dragonfly in our garden – identifying it with the fairy in the tale – I made a bundle of twigs and told it to carry me back to the house. Then a cloud came over the sun – it was the shadow of dear old Ilonka, come to bring me home for supper. As she tucked me under her powerful arm, I remember crying, 'I let the fairy go, but my bundle of wood wouldn't carry me home! I wasn't going to hit it, Ilonka.'

'That is only a silly old story,' she said, kissing me.

'A lie?' I asked.

'No, Miss Bella, a lie is different. A lie is something you tell a story and it deceives somebody and he believes. A liar, little sweetheart, is worse than a thief; a liar will swear your life away. But a story-teller is as good as a holiday among new things – he opens the world.'

I persisted, 'But what if a story isn't true? What if you tell a story and it deceives somebody and he believes it? The story about Zerbin the Woodcutter wasn't true——'.

'– Oh hush, my darling,' Ilonka said, 'you will see enough of Truth before you are a hundred years older. Be thankful for a soft bed and a silly old nurse who knows how to tell a tale. Grown-ups also like to believe impossible stories; even I. Believe, and be happy. Enough.'

I nodded, and said no more. I realised that there is more to Truth than blind faith in a persuasive voice. I was swindled, and my heart was sore.

In one step I had achieved a height of pity and of scorn which only defrauded children may reach.

Young man, when you disillusion a child you may spark such an explosion of blind enlightenment as might blast you out of the world! The child will become wise to

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you, and the wisdom of a child is terrible. All of a sudden—poor me!—I knew that Annibal was a silly story around which my father and mother had built their lives. Thinking of my own shock of revelation, and loving my kind papa and mama as I did, I lay awake half the night wondering how to explain to them that there was no Annibal.

My first gesture was to give away all my dolls and my story-books. I never wanted to see them again. Meanwhile, I wondered to whom I could turn for advice; for I was only a child. Yet I had come to consider my parents as younger and weaker than myself, poor sensitive old things that needed to be sheltered from the facts of life. They were caught fast in the web of their fiction. And even stout, Ilonka was with them in her heavenly-earthly way.

To whom, then, could I turn but that worldly-wise gentleman, the theatrical producer, Jean de Luxe? To him, I uncovered my bruised being, while he fed me hot chocolate at an elegant *pâtisserie*. I said to him, 'M de Luxe, my idea is that if papa and mama may have a dream-child, why should I not have dream-parents? I shall make them behave as *I* want *them* to!'

'No, no,' he said, with a burst of laughter, 'not so fast. Excellent as the idea is, you have not yet the wherewithal to carry it out. You are, God help you, my love, through too much talking to your dogs, and to your dolls, and to the butterflies and the wolves that you make with the shadows of your hands on the wall, an actress: a pantomimist and a disease—undisciplined, I grant you, but with a natural talent. Still, I do not think that you could, without direction, handle an imaginary set of parents.

'But you might deal with what is already in the Barlays' imagination. I mean, Annibal. . . . Remember, from now on, Annibal is your big brother and you are his

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adoring, crippled sister. You love each other and there are secrets between you . . .'

Now Jean de Luxe gave me a small magazine and made me read it silently but thoroughly, carefully turning the pages; then he took the magazine away from me, and made me make the same expressions and perform the same actions over and over and over again, until empty space had bulk and weight. At intervals he told me to reach up and hug him with all my strength; in due course withdrawing himself, so that all my muscles were geared to fling themselves about an imaginary man in thin air, while Jean de Luxe stood by and chuckled, 'Far from bad! . . . Bear in mind that henceforward Annibal sends you affectionate private letters. Not at regular intervals. Sometimes Thursday, sometimes Monday. And when you receive these letters, you smile like Mona Lisa.'

It is difficult to make a mysterious smile when you are swollen and sticky with self-consciousness, and have a brace on your teeth, as I had. Thus the time came when letters came to me addressed in beautiful copperplate handwriting. The envelopes generally contained a small sheet of paper with a few scribbled words, such as: *Having read this, you little imp, scream: 'Annibal is interested in Scientific Agriculture!' Then, with a hop, skip and a jump, make your exit . . . Burn this!*

And I did precisely what old Jean de Luxe said. Letter by letter, I believe, I almost drove my poor parents mad. But my good father, always recovering himself first, said to my mother, 'Wilhelmina, the curse of my family has always been a lack of the agricultural sense. Sheep shave the grass like so many razors where steers might graze or crops rotate. We are lucky in our Annibal' . . . Whereupon Mama would see him in English riding breeches and boots mounted on an Arab horse (snow white, naturally),

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surveying a cover-design of a landscape in emerald green and gold, studded with embroidered peasants and suitable black-and-white cows. As a finishing touch, at his horse's heels, two Dalmatian dogs exquisitely spotted . . .

But sometimes, when I threw myself into more than ordinary ecstasies, they exchanged uneasy glances; and I was now convinced that there was some hope for them, because they knew in their hearts that they were dreaming and felt, in their souls, that it was wrong to impose their dreaming upon me. Loving them all the more for this, I became quite intolerable in my sisterly affection for the unborn Annibal. You have to be cruel to be kind, as the proverb says; and if there is anything crueller than a precocious eleven-year-old girl, may I be preserved from it!

Soon I was receiving a letter every other day and, in obedience to Jean de Luxe's instructions, dropping tantalising details, such as *Annibal has had a duel about a girl and . . . but I promised not to tell! Or, Annibal has grown a golden moustache, and the wife of the—* My father took to walking up and down, while my mother lost weight.

Thus—oh! wise old Jean de Luxe!—I won my battle, jab by ruthless jab, letting my kind-hearted enemy defeat itself by the power of its own wrong-headed confidence. For I was striking at a hollow bag. Believe me, the poets are right—love conquers all—meaning, of course, true love for that which *is*. You can love a dream only *within* a dream, but the sleeper wakes to a loneliness, an emptiness, because a dream cannot love you in return and the purest love starves itself hollow left to itself.

Hence, after a few months of imaginary correspondence with my non-existent brother Annibal, the day came when I uttered a fine outcry and thrust de Luxe's last letter into

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what was later to become my bosom. It slipped through a hollow in my chest and lodged in my bodice.

'Darling, what is it?' my mother asked. Father cried, 'Yes, what is it? Speak!'

I had to be given *sal volatile* before I answered, 'Annibal has married the daughter of a farmer — a widow with three children, from Soskut — and he is sublimely happy! She is only twenty-six, and looks younger!'

'What the devil is this foolishness?' my father asked, in utter consternation. 'Soskut?'

I went on, 'That's what Annibal says. Annibal says that there is no worse run-down farming area in Hungary. Annibal says the water is brackish and the people are backward. Mama always wanted Annibal to be kind to the people, Annibal says, and Annibal says that Papa always wanted him to identify himself with the working classes. So he married Sari, and he is going to bring her home!'

'Exactly when?' my father asked, in a voice like nails going into an empty cardboard box.

'Day after tomorrow,' I replied, clapping my hands. 'Oh Mama, may I have a new white dress, and will there be something for Sari's father? Annibal says he likes *slivovitz*, but he'll drink brandy if he can get it, or even wine. Sari's brothers like wine, Annibal says——'

My father broke out in agony, '— Damn what Annibal says! Where did you pick up all this?'

But my mother, looking at him beseechingly, begged him to be still and, with a troubled expression on her charming face, asked me if she might read Annibal's letter. Dancing from foot to foot I sang, 'Annibal says I *mustn't*, Annibal says I *mustn't*,' until my unhappy father rushed out of the room clutching his head, while my mother sank into a chair and called for spirits of camphor.

I was tempted, then, to fling myself upon her generous

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breast and confess everything; but the actress in me was already uppermost. I danced out and wept in Ilonka's generous lap, but she did not know what I was crying for. And I am not deceiving you, my friend, when I say to you that although I have played Camille while I had hay-fever when the goldenrod was out, and once played Titania with congestion of the lungs and a broken ankle, that was my most punishing rôle!

A day passed. Then another. At last our butler Arpad came in, with an appearance of distress, and said: 'Sir. Madam. There are some people—I do not know what to do—but they say they have the honour to be related to this family. There is with them, it seems, M Annibal. What shall I do?'

I spared everyone trouble by screaming, '*Annibal!*'—and rushing to the door to embrace, with all the art Jean de Luxe had taught me, somebody who was not there; some imaginary person about six feet tall and broad in proportion. I swear I almost defeated the law of gravity and clung to empty air. It was a good performance, especially when I led Annibal into the room by the hand and said, 'Papa, forgive him!' My parents were aghast. But imagine their reaction when, in all-too-solid flesh, the family Annibal had married into came in!

His wife came first, a buxom Slovak blonde, leading a chain of children in various stages of objectionableness. Then followed her mother, a monstrous simpering woman who kept curtsying to the butler; and her father, a brutal son of the soil who kissed my father on both cheeks, banged him on the back, and demanded something hot and strong to drink. In the rear came three of the most loutish oafs you ever saw in your life, who called for wine and kept fondling everybody.

Jean de Luxe had hired them, of course. They were

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actors, and they acted well. But my father could find nothing to say, until my putative sister-in-law Sari held up one of the children for him to kiss. Then he roared, 'What the devil is this confounded nonsense?'

Taking my cue — Jean de Luxe had foreseen everything — I said: 'Oh Papa, say something to Annibal!'

At this he burst out, 'What Annibal? Where Annibal? Whose Annibal? To the devil with Annibal! Get these people out of here!'

Sari said, very solemnly, 'Sir, do you deny the very existence of Annibal?'

My mother answered for him, and said with a dignity that touched my heart, 'Madame, we have only one child, by God's grace; our daughter, Bella.' And she clasped me to her breast.

The old man shouted, 'What, no Annibal?'

My father replied, 'No! Only Bella.'

And then, do you know, he seemed to grow younger and taller, straighter and lighter, like a man relieved of a burden. He broke into an uncontrollable laugh. 'No, there is no Annibal, and never was, thank heaven!' he cried. It is marvellous to see the effect of an old lie dying on the spot — it is as if the whole universe shakes its head to clear it, and sighs a weight off its chest. 'If you have an Annibal, take him away, and much good may he do you. Bella, my sweet, kiss me and forgive me for a fop!'

'Pardon me, too,' said my mother.

Then, the unwelcome visitors having gone away laughing, I began to cry, and was much comforted.

After that there was no happier family than we three, and my easy-going dreamy father became a realist and an extrovert. With my mother's encouragement, he speculated. He lost every penny he possessed. So, with Jean de Luxe's help, I went on the stage, and supported them both

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in comfort for the rest of their lives. But I never married, and I do not dream . . .

'And how do you like that story?' Bella Barlay asked, smiling her three-cornered smile. 'You have been very busy with your notebook.'

I had to ask, 'Is it really true?'

Here her face underwent a transformation. You have seen a leafless tree on a bleak horizon in winter, and it has filled you with a feeling of desolation; but suddenly the sun shines through and lends to its nakedness a glory and a refulgence. So her old face became irradiated.

'With development, it could be a good idea for a play,' she said.

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The most arresting face I ever saw had no distinguishing marks or characteristics. It belonged to an elderly jeweller who was known as Old Gold, and was interesting to a connoisseur of faces much as disjointed fragments of ancient parchment are interesting to an antiquary: it was a little heap of disconnected expressions, somewhat blurred by time and fate, and impossible to read in its entirety.

You felt that if only you could arrange it in its original order, there would appear something of vast significance.

I met him first in Paris when, idly window-shopping in the tangle of streets on the left bank of the Seine, I saw, in his window, a scarf-pin that attracted me. When I went into his tiny shop, Old Gold was playing, left hand against right, with a pair of dice on a green-baize tray. I had never seen such dice; nor such throwing.

His every cast turned up a natural – six and five, six and one, four and three, or five and two – when he threw with his right hand. But when he threw with his left, only the losing numbers came up – double six, two and one, and double one.

Without appearing to look at me, although I could feel his scrutiny, he said, in heavily accented English:

‘You are interested in my dice? I amuse myself with them, like the Emperor Claudius, playing left hand against right. It keeps the hands supple, and clarifies the

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* intellect. They are part of a set of six dice made for some nobleman, probably Russian, a couple of hundred years ago, for the game of hazard. I wish I had the set.

'They are made of mammoth-ivory, and the spots are of inlaid gold. And there is the trick — some of the inlays go deeper than others, so that they are, in fact, loaded dice, gold being heavy . . . unless you have the knack of handling them, which, no doubt, the gentleman had who caused them to be made; and which I have learned. . . .

'But what can I do for you?' he asked.

I pointed out the pin which had caught my fancy. Old Gold picked it up contemptuously, and said, 'Junk. This is not a gentleman's pin. It is half a pair of ear-rings, mounted on a pin; and not even a lady's ear-ring, at that. Try this.' And he handed me a pin mounted with a half-opaque, grey-white stone, in the heart of which was embedded something like a tiny tree. 'Genuine moss-agate,' he said. 'It came out of an old brooch. You can have it for three thousand francs. Play your cards right, and you can make a fortune.'

'How?'

'Excuse my answering a question with a question. How many people are there in Paris? Say, five million. How many of these wear a tie-pin? Say, five thousand, at the most. The odds are about a thousand to one against anybody you meet wearing a pin in his tie. Of these, about four thousand five hundred will wear a pearl or a horse-shoe, perhaps.

'You eat in company, in restaurants, no doubt. Lead up to it; complain of the vegetables which, you will say, are not fresh. Eventually, safely wager — pretending to be drunk — that you have on your person the oldest vegetable in Paris. Lay odds of five hundred to fifty. The stakes being held, produce this pin. The moss inside ~~it~~ is about a

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hundred million years old, and in a perfect state of preservation.'

'That would be cheating,' I said. 'By pure chance, looking up another word beginning with M in the encyclopedia, I happened to notice that the moss in moss-agate isn't really a vegetable at all, but what they call a "dendritic inclusion".'

He snapped his supple old fingers and exclaimed: 'A chance in twenty million! Take the pin for a present, and come behind for a cup of tea.' He added: 'Dendritic inclusion may also mean a fossilised moss, if you want to split hairs. . . . Fania!'

Obedient to his call, there came from the back parlour the most stately and beautiful girl I had ever seen in three dimensions. She walked like a queen until she was within a yard of me, when Old Gold said: 'Fania! How many more times must I tell you to put your glasses on when you are in the shop?'

She took out of her pocket a pair of diabolically-angled spectacles with ornate rims, put them on and saw me, and said: 'Oh, how d'you do, Monsieur?'

'Tea,' said the old man.

When she was gone, he said: 'My grand-niece Fania. A good girl, but vain — she won't wear her glasses. There is a certain courage that comes of myopia, though. She once frightened an armed thief out of the shop by walking up to him and peering down the barrel of his pistol. . . .'

So Old Gold ran on, until I gathered that he had come to France in 1905, and went to work as a book-keeper for a jeweller.

By hard study he became an accountant and an actuary, which accounted for his deeply-rooted interest in the odds for or against a specified chance. Then he proceeded to make a fortune by what others called 'lucky' investments.

• He was always a jump or two ahead of any slump or crash or boom. At last he retired, but the fever of commerce was in his blood. So, like a wise man, he went back to his beginnings and opened a little jewellery shop, dealing not in precious stones, but in old and quaint stuff.

And, in between times, played with loaded dice, left hand against right, for imaginary stakes. . . .

'They used to call me the Student sixty years ago,' said Old Gold, blowing on his tea.

'Who were *They*? I'll tell you later. . . .

'The last time I opened a book with real interest was ten months ago, and that was not, properly speaking, a book; it was a gem, an *objet d'art*.

'And who brought it into my shop? A type to which I am allergic. More gentlemanly than a gentleman, more English than the English.

'Women love them. I do not. This one came in, a shade too quickly, with a package under his arm. It had a newspaper folded over it. I went on playing with my silly dice. Then I said, "Yes?"

"Here is something that may interest you," he said; and took out something almost square and quite heavy, carefully wrapped in a very old piece of purple velvet.

'It was a book, yes — but what a book! It was about ten inches by nine, and the covers were of pure silver about a quarter of an inch thick, hinged to the spine of the book, which was also of silver. Front cover, spine and clasp were most wonderfully engraved, and inlaid, in a beautiful floral pattern, with every possible variety of what fools call "semi-precious" stones, in all the colours of the garden.

'I opened this book. It was an album, such as girls used to keep in old times. On the flyleaf was an inscription.

"I see," I said to the owner of the book, "that this was

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presented to the Countess Bogatyrov by the Tsar Alexander the Second on her seventeenth birthday in the year 1823."

"What, you read Russian?" he asked superciliously.

"I answered: Before you were born. I can also accommodate you in English, Polish, German, Finnish, Latin, Hebrew and Greek. Also a little Turkish."

"That book has been in my family for generations," said he. "It is full of valuable autographs."

"And indeed it was. Pushkin had written a verse in it, *To Irina*; Gogol had written in it; Lermontov had contributed a gloomy sonnet; Borodin had scrawled a few bars of some tune (I cannot read music) and so forth.

"And in between, carefully covered with tissue-paper, were certain poor old pressed flowers and locks of faded hair. Evidently this album had passed from mother to daughter through several generations, and had been much loved and cherished. I tell you, a bibliophile would have given his right hand for those pages, as I would have given mine for their covers.

"Your name, I take it, is Bogatyrov?" I asked.

"He replied proudly: "No. I am a Dolgorúcki. My aunt is a Bogatyrov."

"And she gave you this album?"

"Yes."

"I knew then that he was lying, as I had expected he would; because, in giving away such an heirloom, a woman gives away her soul; and her mother's soul before her. Furthermore, the last entry in the album was, perhaps, the most touching of all. It was dated 1914, and translated, read: *For Elizaveta, my undying love. Andréy. Underneath, in a woman's hand: He died at Tannenberg and my heart died with him. . . .* What woman would give that away?

I played with my dice and observed this liar without seeming to, until, as I had foreseen, he became fidgety and asked: "Well?"

"What do you want for this album?" I asked, controlling my voice; certain old memories were coming back to me.

"Perhaps he had some vestige of conscience left, for he said, "I don't exactly want to sell it. I want to raise money on it until tomorrow."

"I am not a pawnbroker," I said. "Try one of them."

"I did," he said, with that engaging frankness peculiar to his breed, "and none of the thieves would offer a centime more than twenty-five thousand francs."

"I observed that the newspaper in which the album had been covered was folded back at the sporting page, and that he had marked a horse called Gay Debonair.

"He went on: "I need at least forty thousand. Hold the book as security, and tomorrow afternoon I promise to pay you back sixty."

"Very well," I said. "I'll let you have forty thousand francs, and hold the book as security. I will give you a note in writing that, on receipt of sixty thousand francs in cash, the book will be returned to its owner."

"I wrote the note, took the album, and gave him the money. With the notes in his hand he swelled up like a frog, and became even more objectionable. He felt that he had charmed me.

"Interesting dice, those," he said. "Do you play?"

"For my own amusement, one hand against the other, to pass time," I said.

"Fancy a little game?" he asked.

"I seldom gamble," I said. "But if you like . . ."

"Half an hour later he had only ten thousand francs and was perspiring.

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"Stop here. The dice are against you. Take your ten thousand francs, and my advice. Don't put your money on Gay Debonair — put it on The Macaroni."

'At the age of nineteen, in Moscow, I belonged to a tiny group called the Militant Reformists, under the leadership of a man we called the Genius.

'We all had our nicknames, or *sobriquets*. I, for instance, was the Student, because I read books and wore pince-nez. Then there was the Economist, who had a scheme whereby all men might be made equal overnight; and the Theoretician, who wrote inflammatory leaflets; and a woman, the Beauty, who was supposed to be irresistible. This was in the year 1903.

'The Beauty was, perhaps, the most dangerous and reckless of the lot. The most perverse woman I ever met.

'She is, still; she was the noisiest atheist and free-love talker that ever was — yet when she suspected a young man of toying with her daughter's affections, she drove him to the altar at the point of a pistol.

'When she came to Paris she opened a vegetarian restaurant near the Sorbonne, on the grounds that it was wrong to eat what she contemptuously called flesh — but she herself lunched daily on beefsteak across the street. Such is the woman who is now Tatiana, of Tatiana's Tea Room. . . .

'I went to Tatiana's because I knew that there I was certain to find Osip, who used to be called the Theoretician. He almost lives on the premises. He gets a living by misprinting, by hand, a four-page paper in Russian, entitled the *Accuser!* Very simply, he picks up the day before yesterday's daily newspaper and translates the editorial. At the head of each stolen editorial he prints some such headline as: IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO

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AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING. His old friends buy advertising space for old time's sake.

'When I found him that afternoon, he was poring over a week-old account of a prize-fight, above which he had already written:

!!! BRUTAL SPECTACLE !!!

'I treated him to an aperitif. As usual he started to reminisce, in his bantering way. I was not in the mood, but I was patient.

'“Aha!” he said. “How times have changed. The Student—a bloated gold merchant! *The Man Who Didn't*, I called you when you came back from the bridge, with your chocolate box under your arm and your face like wax. . . . So Bogatyrov died in his bed after all, of kidney trouble. . . .”

'I had known that Osip would come around to this subject; it was supposed to be a sore point with me.

'You see, in the old days there were many secret societies in Russia. The Militant Reformists, of which I was a member, was the least significant.

'One day our leader, the Genius, called a midnight meeting and said that enough was enough; the time had come to act; and not to talk. General Bogatyrov had broken up a riot with a cavalry charge and was on his way to get another decoration.

'The Genius knew everything: even the general's itinerary. (The Genius turned out to be an agent of the secret police.) At such-and-such a moment he would pass in his carriage over a certain bridge. The weather being hot, the windows of the carriage would be open. And here was our big chance.

'He, the Genius, had procured explosive, fuse and

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detonator, which would be made into a most terrible bomb by the ingenuity of an East Prussian comrade named Ruhmkorff, the Chemist.

'Now there was no nonsense about the Genius. The one who threw this bomb into General Bogatyrov's carriage was, he said – as if we didn't know – a dead man; but it would be like Jason planting the dragon's teeth: an army would spring from his bones.

'We all volunteered in one voice – especially Tatiana, the Beauty. I drew the short straw.

'So the Genius gave me instructions: I was to dress as a young man of property – I was a personable little fellow then, believe it or not – and wait by the bridge, with the bomb in an elegant French chocolate box under my arm; just like a comfortable out-of-town landowner waiting for his fiancée.

'As the carriage of General Bogatyrov passed, I was to pull the blue ribbon with which the chocolate box was tied, thus starting the mechanism, and throw it neatly into the carriage.

'It was all arranged. Nothing could go wrong. Everybody said good-bye to me, and the Beauty kissed me passionately. So I took my heavy chocolate box and lounged about the bridge, waiting. . . .

'My friend, I have lived nearly eighty years; but never have I lived so long as in that half hour of time. At last I heard horses, and someone said: "Here he is."

'First came a number of plain-clothes policemen, mounted on bicycles. Then a cavalry escort. Then the carriage. It was a closed carriage, but with open windows, as the Genius had predicted.

'And there sat General Bogatyrov. My fingers tightened on the ribbon of the chocolate box. Bogatyrov was eighty yards away, sixty, forty . . .

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'But then I saw that the general was not alone in the carriage. Seated by him was a girl, a mere child of thirteen or so, with golden hair and blue eyes, dressed all in blue and carrying a little bouquet of blue flowers. Our eyes met, the child's and mine, and she smiled and nodded. Then the carriage had passed; and I found myself standing, hat in hand, my chocolate box secure under my arm, and my mouth hanging wide open.

'A cigarette seller said: "Ah, she's a pretty one, the Countess Elizaveta!" But I did not answer.

'I went back to the hotel and carefully put the bomb back on the wash-stand where it had been assembled.

"Disconnect this," I said to Ruhmkorff. "Bogatyrov I will kill with pleasure. But I cannot make war on women and children, and there was a young girl in the carriage. . . ."

'The Beauty sprang at me. She despised precious stones and all property, but wore several valuable diamond rings, "in case of sudden emergency", as she said. I still bear the scar.

'But the Genius pulled her away and said, in his smoothest voice: "Perhaps the Student was right. Perhaps it might have done us no good in the world at large, to kill a small girl. Go home and rest, Student – but be here at eleven o'clock tomorrow night for a discussion."

' . . . But by eleven o'clock next morning I was on a train rushing to the German border; for I never liked the Genius when he spoke soothingly.

'So I came to Paris. And one by one the other members of our party followed. But Osip always called me the Man Who Didn't. . . .'

' "I wonder what became of her," I said, ordering more tea.

'Osip knew all about it, as I suspected he might. "Eliza-

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veta Bogatyrov?" he said. "Ha! She put a few small-ads in the *Accuser!* a few years ago, in Russian and French, offering her services as an expert needlewoman and embroideress, and so forth.

"She got out before Lenin's *coup d'état*, but somebody stole most of her jewels and stuff, so she was broke," he went on. "She was to marry some Southerner, somebody called Bostanjoglo, a major of infantry, I think."

"Andréy Bostanjoglo?" I asked.

"That's right. Killed at Tannenberg in the marshes, I heard."

"Where is she now then?" I asked.

"I don't know. The last I heard, she was working for a Madame Deschamps, who likes to have a gentlewoman, a noblewoman, washing her stockings and things. It would have been better to have chucked that chocolate box, Student."

"I must be getting back," I said.

'Being tired now, I took a taxi, mentally charging it against the nephew's account; but not before I had gone back to the shop and taken the album out of the safe.

'Madame Deschamps was not at home, but a maid told me Mademoiselle Bogatyrov's address.

'The old countess lives in a rowdy, wretched neighbourhood, in two little rooms five floors up. I walked part of the way there.

'On the way, I paused at the window of a *pâtisserie*, for something had caught my eye – a box of chocolates tied with blue ribbon; an immense box which, properly filled, would have contained at least four pounds.

'I went into the shop. The young lady said, "Of course, there's only one layer of chocolates."

"I'll take one," I said. "You like sweets?"

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'She complained of getting fat, although she displayed a figure worthy of Artemis.

'“Keep the chocolates, then; I want only the box,” I said, and emptied it on to the counter.

'Looking back as I left, I saw her making a little twirling motion with her right forefinger at her temple – which, in any language, means *screw loose*. In the street, I put the album with its velvet case into the box; and with this under my arm, climbed the stairs to the countess's rooms.

'She answered my knock. Looking at her I felt, with a kind of pain in the heart, that I too was very old. Her eyes were still blue, but faded and rimmed with red as if she had been crying; and she still wore blue, also faded. Her hair was magnificent, though it was no longer golden, but of a clean silver, done in a pompadour, and she carried herself like a queen.

'“I am sorry,” she said: “but I am not buying anything today.”

'I said, in Russian: “But *I* have something for *you*, madame.” I presented the box. “I found it on the Metro,” I said.

'She opened the box, saw the album, and uttered such a cry as I have never heard before – of joy and pain.

'“I have looked high and low,” she said, when she had done crying, and had fallen into that disturbing state between laughter and tears. “How did you find it? How did you know it was mine?”

‘Extempore, I said, “I find things out, because I work for a finance agency. I collect back payments on bad debts. And I would recommend you to be more careful with your money, because I see that there are twenty thousand francs in notes between two pages towards the back.”

'She looked, and there was the money. Naturally; I had put it there . . .

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'Now she regained her composure. She took out four thousand-franc notes, and handed them to me with an imperial gesture. "Please accept this for your trouble," she said.

'I took the money humbly, and heard her say under her breath: "A chocolate box tied with blue ribbon. . . . I seem to remember riding with Grandpapa in a carriage, and there was a little man with funny eyes carrying just such a box; and I said to Grandpapa, 'I think he was going to give me that box of chocolates; if he had, I'd have thrown him my flowers . . . ' Or perhaps I dreamed it."

' "Hide your property more carefully, please," I said.

' "Oh, I will, I will! And thank you, thank you! "

'On the way back I bought an evening newspaper. The Macaroni had won in a canter at twenty to one. Although I am not a gambling man, I follow the horses; they keep the actuarial part of my mind alert . . .

'Her nephew who was, as he said, a Dolgorúcki, was waiting for me on my doorstep when I opened the shop next morning. By the look of him, he had had what we used to call a night on the tiles – but I could see by his swagger that he had money in his pocket.

' "Now," he said, flinging down the piece of writing I had given him, and taking out a wallet. "Here's your sixty thousand and an extra ten for yourself. Let's have the book as arranged."

'I said, "That. Oh yes". . . and put the money in the till. Then I said, "I have written here: *Returned To Its Owner*. That has already been done; the album is in the possession of your aunt, the Countess Bogatyrov. We are all square. If you try and steal that album again it won't travel two miles before you are apprehended. Now go."

'He went, because there was no argument.

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'So I showed a little profit on the deal and had some . . . call it fun, if you like. . . .'

But then his niece Fania called him into the shop. 'Oh, Uncle,' she cried, radiant and beautiful. 'That red bracelet for five thousand francs. I sold it to a lady.'

'What red bracelet for five thousand francs?' Old Gold asked. She held out the slip. He looked at it and then said in a terrible voice: 'Fania, put your glasses on!'

She did so, and began to cry.

The slip read: 'Fr. 50,000.'

Old Gold shrugged and said: 'Easy come, easy go . . .

Ou Est The Corpse

De Ma Tante?

When the mist comes up from the marshes in the Rother Valley, and you do not know whether you are coming or going between Tenterden and Northiam and Beckley and goodness knows where, best go to the Rother Valley Hotel.

This establishment, incidentally, also doesn't know exactly where it is: one of its signs says that it is The First Hotel in Sussex; the other, that it is The Last Hotel in Kent. The reverse of this holds good, since the hotel is on one of those English frontiers – just here you may stand with one leg in Sussex and the other in Kent – hence, the hotel may just as well be the First in the one county and the Last in the other.

People get lost in the valley, and are grateful for the hospitality of the hotel, where the wines are neat, the food is good, and as for the company, you can take it or leave it. The geography of the locality being what it is, you may meet a long-lost friend, or enemy, in the saloon bar, squeezing the foggy dew out of his moustache. You may encounter the unlikeliest people: for example, a Justice of the Peace eating potato-crisps cheek by jowl with a man who recently stole bullion and got away with it, and who is drinking a small glass of stout.

In the Rother Valley anything can happen – as someone said of New York.

I was not surprised, therefore, to meet an old acquaint-

ance named Albert Dedgeworth, looking askance at a fat Labrador: her name is Susie, and she is too indolent to avoid the glance of the human eye—she just looks right through you. If some other dog makes itself offensive to her, Susie heaves a sigh and sits on it, crushing the breath out of its body with her enormous weight. When I came in, Susie was lying with her ponderous muzzle on the instep of one of Dedgeworth's exquisitely polished black shoes—he, through the influence of the Marquess of Dedgeworth, holds some minor 'position in the Foreign Office and dresses accordingly: black homburg, discreetly shabby fur-lined black overcoat, and all. He always carries a little black attaché case and has the appearance of one who is either going to, or coming from, a conference at the Kremlin. His face is like an egg upon which a child has sketched a face.

He was pleased to see me. Discreetly sipping a little glass of sherry, he asked: 'I say—does this dog bite?'

I replied: 'Shove her with your foot, and she'll roll over. She is too lazy even to bite bones. Only, I think she has worms. You had better be careful of that.'

At this, Dedgeworth got up hastily—one could read, in his transparent face, that he feared eventually to be called over the coals on account of a general worming of the Foreign Office; and then there would be more forms to fill up, more reprimands to be handed down; perhaps a strike of Civil Servants . . . cartoons in the Yellow Press; reshuffles; vulgar commentaries from America . . .

Dedgeworth stepped over the dog Susie and found a seat in another corner. 'What brings you here, Kersh?' he asked.

'The curry,' I said. 'But you know me, I'm here and there and everywhere. The point is, what brings you here?'

He said: 'Got to have a word with a fellow.'

'I hear the Russians have a big recreation ground near

Où Est *The Corpse* De Ma Tante?

Benenden. Who's the bloke? Malenkov? Molotov? Ob-
lomov?

'Purely a private matter,' said Dedgeworth, unhappily, offering me the cheapest drink procurable. '— Oh dear!'

He said this with a kind of jump because, at that moment, the door opened with a bang, and a dark, cheerful man bounded into the saloon bar, showing eighteen teeth, white as sugar, in an all-embracing smile. He was dressed in tweeds, too tight fitting, and sported a painted tie. On one side of his head he wore one of those beret caps; and somehow it became him. He saw Dedgeworth and extended a plump but powerful hand decorated with three or four aluminium rings that French aviators and racing motorists used to exchange as keepsakes, and gave Dedgeworth's reluctant hand a grip that squeezed from him a kind of ladylike shriek.

He hauled Dedgeworth to his feet, embraced him and (to the delight of the local grazier) kissed him on both cheeks, shouting, in broken English which I shall not attempt phonetically: 'Oh! Albair! Alypally — long time no see, my dear! Your charming and delightful aunt is indisposed. You should visit her, darling, yes; no, you should. You have your little family differences? Ah, bah! Let all be forgive and forgot, that is the motto of Bubu-le-Costaud! Your lady auntie bears you no grief, old chicken, and I have something in my pocket to prove it. Eh, my little lamb of God?'

Albert Dedgeworth, hideously embarrassed, muttered in his Foreign Office French: 'Please, my friend — there are strangers present!'

But Bubu-le-Costaud, quite unabashed, took me by both hands (I should not care to have those hands laid on me in malice) and, laughing an infectious laugh, cried: 'Any friend of my little darling Albair is mine to command

'until, hell pops! . . . I knew a m'sieur Kursz a long time ago, but somehow I do not think he was a relation of yours. He met with an accident. He lost his head; literally. In this life it is necessary to keep your head. It is the Organ of Thought. Thought, old boy, is, as I once heard, of vital importance. One of my fellow countrymen – I forget his name – I suspect his origins – said: "*I think therefore . . .*" the rest I forget.'

Dedgeworth said: 'Shall we get to business?'

The other man said: 'Oh, you bet you my life!' A cloud came over his face, which then became curiously still and indefinably ugly. 'It is impossible for me, as a man of honour, to say that I like your manner,' said he. '*Manner, or manners?*' he asked, looking at me.

I said: 'This is private business——'

' – That's right . . . Leave us alone, Gerald, won't you?' said Dedgeworth.

I stood up, treading on the dog, who did not notice; but M Bubu-le-Costaud said: 'No. This gentleman is sympathetic – he is not cold.' Then he made an apostrophe, looking at the ceiling: 'Oh, you English – why must you be so English?'

He went on: 'The Americans, for example, I have sympathy for. They beat the unmentionables out of the Germans, and some of the stuffing out of the English. Do not argue with me because I know. However, Lafayette won the War of Independence, or the Civil War, or something. I am a citizen of the world. So is Herr Kirsch. I knew a Putzi Kirsch in Hamburg, but he died of wounds. It is odd; also I knew a Gospodin Karsh in Odessa, but, according to the records he might have been someone who went under the pseudonym of Green . . . Some accident with seventeen kilos of dynamite . . . It was difficult to assemble this person . . .'

‘Où Est *The Corpse De Ma Tante*?’

Dedgeworth said: ‘Can’t we, at least, go into the dining-room?’ – because the grazier was looking at the ceiling which meant he was listening intently.

We went into the dining-room, which was empty. I pretended to want to go away but Bubu-le-Costaud would not let me. Looking at Dedgeworth with a look curiously compounded of high comedy and low malice, he caught me by the wrist. I daresay I might have broken his grip but I didn’t want to. Dedgeworth sat on the edge of a chair, looking, as the saying goes, like Death warmed up. He said to me, in broken German: ‘A seal, it is, of confidence. To secrecy you are sworn.’

I replied: ‘Si.’

The other man took out a sealskin wallet with gold corners, and carefully extracted an envelope which he gave to Dedgeworth, saying: ‘Normally, my old basket of fish, I would have given this to you discreetly, in some unheard-of place – say a public lavatory. But you have wounded your dear aunt’ – he kissed his hand – ‘and hurt my feelings, which are sensitive. I am, by nature, retiring, gallant, hypersensitive. I am easier to bruise than an apricot. You are harsh, cold, my little smog. There was a time when, to employ a bloody vulgarism, you would not have got away with it. Spit in my eye and call me the son-of-a-dog and kick me in the tripe and – I give you permission, sweetheart, to pick up that poker and bash me in the sweetbreads – but there was a time when you and all Scotland Yard would not have dared to look down their nose at me. So here, right in front of your friend, my little *rond-de-cuir*, here is your auntie’s cheque for two thousand pounds. It is taking the bread from my feet and the roof from my mouth. Na!’

Dedgeworth, having looked into the envelope, pocketed it and said: ‘Thanks.’

Bubu-le-Côstaud lifted him out of his chair, kissed him on both cheeks – winking at me over his shoulder – and said: ‘I have ordered a magnum of Cordon Rouge. Not for you. For him. I knew m’sieu Korsh . . . Subsequently he joined the Foreign Legion; but he deserted in 1909, I think. I saw a photograph of his remains after he had been shockingly mutilated by Touaregs, or somebody . . . It must have been like putting together a giggoz-puzzle. Yet there is something about you . . .’

Then he turned to Dedgeworth and said: ‘This mystifies this sympathetic gentleman, yes? You will tell him this story, my cabbage, or, as the Americans say, *else!*’

I saw him to the door. He had a beautiful white Bentley. It was interesting to observe that, before he got in, he looked out of the corners of his eyes up and down the road; then hopped into the driver’s seat and roared away into the mist of the valley like a man pursued.

When I went back to the dining-room, there was the magnum of Cordon Rouge, and Dedgeworth. He said: ‘Don’t have anything to do with that man. It is not merely that he is an incorrigible crook. He is an unmitigated snurge.’

I have seen great gentlemen behave as Dedgeworth behaved on that occasion; and have heard of remarkable instances of such self-restraint in the Blood Royal. My old eyes have seen Colonel the Lord Exe, conducting a C.O.’s parade of the Coldstream Guards, with a wasp on his nose: eight hundred of the battalion were so frightened that they were hard put to it to slap the butts of their rifles, for fear of enraging that wasp. But the colonel, standing rigid, with a face like a mottled plaster cast of one of the Furies, refused even to twitch his nose. The wasp stung him – it was when the drummer, in his emotion, broke one of his sticks – and the parade ended in the normal

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manner. The adjutant took C.O.'s Orders next morning because, as the mess sergeant said: 'Poor old Exe's prognosis' – he meant 'proboscis' – 'has come up like a strawberry.' All the same, although nothing is more absurd than a swollen nose, we honoured the old man for it. If he had been facing a firing squad, say, we would have said: 'Serve him right, and a good job, too.' But a man who can stand to attention with an angry wasp between his eyes deserves to be a leader of men.

A steeple-jack who had fallen down a mill chimney, and a Durham collier who had been cornered in a crack by a mad pit-pony, both agree that this was nothing to conducting a parade with a wasp on the bridge of your nose. . . . But I digress: I meant only to indicate that Dedge-worth's face closely resembled that of the colonel, just before the wasp stung him.

Mr Harrild, the hotelier, in whose huge hands the magnum looked like half a pint, popped the cork; and, after he had gone, Dedge-worth proceeded to tell me the most fantastic love-story in the world.

That man, he told me, was all kinds of a rogue. Scraping the thinking part of his silly head, fumbling for terms of abuse not too undiplomatic, he fished up unheard-of epithets. The man, he said, was a leper, a pippkin, a trollybob, a snurge and, in effect, unsavoury as a worn-out bicycle seat. He went on, with the pale passion of his kind, until I asked him why he took money from such a type, let alone allowing the fellow to kiss him in public. And he, in the Foreign Office – fur collar, umbrella, and what have you!

Dedge-worth said that it was not the money of that unmitigated snurge that he had accepted; it was family money, and his by right. He would see that loathsome drip

starving in the gutter before he accepted a five-pound note from him. All this with ejaculations such as: 'No, but I mean to say!' and: 'There's a limit, what?'

I said, I think for the second time, that M Bubu-le-Costaud seemed to have a nice nature; whereupon Dedge-worth told me that it was all very well for me – I always did have a yearning for the gutter – only instead of *nostalgie de la boue*, he said *nostalgie du beurre*, which means, 'a yearning for butter'.

Naturally, I asked him how a Dedge-worth had come to be associated with a fellow he so deeply despised. He said – oh well, he didn't exactly. It was all the fault of his aunt Sara who (strictly confidentially between us) was what might be described as a kind of a twillip. An old maid. She looked, he said, like a crow that has fluttered about trying to escape from a paint shop; one was ashamed to be seen with her; only, as luck would have it, aunt Sara had three-quarters of a million pounds to leave, and times were hard.

He applied to this elderly lady the most opprobrious appellations, this side of four-letter words. Aunt Sara, he said, was a flibbertygibbet, a schtumpf, an unadulterated cat, a fungus, a worm – in fact, nearly every forbidden thing that creeps and crawls.

I said to him: 'Come, now, Dedge-worth; I do not get your line of reasoning. You would not take money from snurges, etcetera, but you have no hesitation in accepting it from all the strange creepy creatures you mention. I do not get this.'

He said that he had a boy going to school, and a girl going somewhere or other; an establishment to keep up, appearances to keep up . . . He vaguely indicated that his sable collar was made scruffy by an expert, at considerable expense . . . In any case, his aunt's money –

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he called her 'that old trout' – was his by right. It did not go against his conscience to touch her (not physically, for that would be repulsive) for a thousand or two every so often. But he could not possibly meet her: she, therefore, sent that slob as go-between, with something in an envelope.

- A bureaucrat must learn to tolerate the intolerable, and inflict it, too. Dedgeworth, conceding nothing, reserved for himself the right to mumble under his breath.

When he was half-way through the magnum, his story came out, in the strictest confidence. The Foreign Office does not keep any confidences; I'll see them further before I keep theirs!

His Aunt Sara, at Dedgeworth's instigation, had put down the money for a station-wagon built on to the engine and chassis of a Rolls-Royce. It was a magnificent machine. The back seats folded away to make a double-bed; the boot was constructed to hold luggage for a large family.

It was Dedgeworth's Aunt Sara who was set on this idea; she was a romantic woman, and liked the idea of picnics, especially in her new Rolls-Royce car. It was she who paid for everything. Therefore, who was to prevent her bringing along a Primus stove and a frying-pan, in case there might be a picnic? Certainly not Dedgeworth: he was his aunt's heir, and kept feeling her pulse all the way to Dieppe.

The idea was, to ride southward through France and over the Pyrenees, resting awhile in some quiet Spanish town, and later, getting hold of a boat. A gentleman out of the Foreign Office does not get hold of a boat in the manner of Sir Henry Morgan: he hires the vessel, and this takes money, which Dedgeworth did not possess. His

aunt, however, was well supplied with it.

Thus, it seemed that the plan was going through; the old lady had no idea of the meaning of money. She had never laid out more than half a crown on a meal – she did not know what was what.

And what was what? Dedgeworth knows: it is, spending thirty-seven and six on a meal. That is what.

His Aunt Sara, who believed in him, followed his advice. She even bought new clothes. Dedgeworth felt that he had better placate the old girl, for whom – by the time he came to telling this story – he had developed a dreadful hate.

They went, first of all, to Paris, where Dedgeworth took her to *Le Bœuf Sur Le Toit*; at which the old lady screamed, but not without pleasure. It is my firm conviction that he was trying to worry his old aunt to death, because then he took her to a night-club called *Le Belly Danse* which, to his disgust, delighted and amused her. She was abashed by the mannequins at the *Haute Couture*, but giggled at *Tous Mes Chats Sont Nus* at the *Moulin de Garotte*. He had hoped, I believe, to shock the old lady to her grave with that spectacle in Montmartre, where you are waited on by undertakers and eat off coffins: it made her laugh until she had hiccups. . . . He had hopes, here; but Aunt Sara seemed to be made of iron. She wanted to go somewhere else, saying that she had never had such a lively time in her life.

At last Mr and Mrs Dedgeworth got the old lady into bed and permitted themselves to collapse. Next morning they took the road southwards . . .

'The old beast wore us out,' Dedgeworth protested. 'She had the vitality of an unmitigated hyena. This, at seventy-four, mind you! She couldn't pass a cabaret . . . winked at people – really! To cut a long story short, we got to

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some wretched town called ~~Something-le-Something~~, not far from Perpignan, I believe, and found a hotel with a bathroom. No water. Still, a man felt he was near civilisation.'

. . . So, Dedgeworth and his wife put ~~his~~ aunt to bed and retired themselves—she had exhausted them. Towards eight o'clock a chambermaid knocked at their door and, wringing her hands, said—if one may trust the French of the Foreign Office: 'Alas, woe is me, the old one is stiff and frigid.'

'*Qu'est ce que, you mean?*' shouted Dedgeworth, while his wife cried: '*Was ist das?*'

'*No hablo espagnol,*' said the chambermaid. 'I go get manager.'

They found Dedgeworth's Aunt Sara stiff and stark in her bed. The police and a doctor were summoned. The doctor said that he had not practised medicine so long without being able to diagnose a cerebral haemorrhage; at which the Mayor said: 'I thought so all along.'

Dedgeworth ran upstairs, presumably to weep, but actually to work out death duties. He came down, ostentatiously wiping his nose, and said that the body of his aunt must be suitably wrapped up in sheets and put in the back of the car: he would take it quickly to Marseilles, the necessary documents being made out, whence his Aunt Sara should be properly boxed up and conveyed to England.

Dedgeworth indicated that he had never had a more relaxed journey. His wife was amiable for the first time in years, and he was occupied with figures for which he had always a good head, as I have mentioned. He was figuring, which he enjoyed. He drove day and night, because a body does not keep very well in that climate, until he got to Marseilles, when he tried to explain to an official who

spoke nothing but the *patois*, that he had a dead aunt in his automobile.

He said something like this: '*Hélas! J'ai une tante. I mean, j'avais* – or should I say, *j'ai eu une tante. Pourtant, she is morte. A foe que je get sa sanglé bod to England – schnell!*'

The Customs official said something like: '*Rattafia, mattoovia, ah, bah!*' – and went to find a blond man who said he spoke English. This man could only say: 'Dear lady, I love you very much.'

Dedgeworth made some idiotic remark, such as, translated, might mean: 'I love the corpse of my aunt and have enveloped her in linen.' The other man said, with emotion: '*Quelle délicatesse!*'

At last, Dedgeworth yelled: '*Pour l'amour de goodness, où est the British Consul?*'

The official said what may be freely translated as: 'Oh, but my faith! Head of the pig! Blood of God! It is nothing but a foreigner trying to talk English – can you imagine that?'

Then this man brought along another man who gave Dedgeworth a look which went right through him, and addressed him in fluent English. Now Dedgeworth, though well educated, had a tendency to stammer when upset. He made some ridiculous noises, and was led by the scruff of the neck to the police station. It was assumed that he was a Russian.

His wife, whom Dedgeworth had armed with a revolver in case of 'dagoes', ran after him flourishing this weapon and was seized.

Eventually, of course, the affair was straightened out at the local police station, and apologies were offered. But when Dedgeworth, accompanied by the British Consul, asked: '*Où est my car?*' – nobody knew.

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La voiture de m'sieu? bellowed a gendarme.

Dedgeworth shouted: '*Je m'en* – I forget what about the *quelque chose* – où est the corpse de ma tante? No, I mean to say, really

Quite simply, that elegant Rolls-Royce station-wagon, together with all his luggage and his wife's luggage, and the dead body of his aunt, had disappeared.

The Chief of Police said: 'It would appear that someone stole it . . .'

'Evidently . . .' said the Mayor.

The British Consul said: '*Je demande* what the *enfer* . . . eh?' He added: 'Sorry, old man. Bit bloody, what?'

The Chief of Police demanded a translation, and the linguist of the party said that there was an old man – Vieillard – presumably covered with blood. At this an officer half-drew his pistol, while the British Consul, throwing up his hands, howled: 'This is an International Incident!'

The Mayor and the Chief of Police, not knowing quite what to make of this, consulted with some old wretch, who said, to translate freely: 'There is nothing of what. They have spiders in the ceiling, these types, there. Pooh, bah! Perfidious Albion! They do not understand the language.' At this, a sheep-faced fellow with a cast in his left eye said to Dedgeworth: 'Kiss me, miss – we marry tomorrow, perhaps.'

You can imagine the state of mind of Dedgeworth, shouting: '*Où est* the corpse de ma tante?' By which time his wife was surrounded by sympathetic women who kept hitting her on the back and crossing themselves. One of these women took Dedgeworth by the throat and shook him, screaming in the *patois* insults which it is just as well not to print. So he lost his collar. But he still demanded the corpse of his aunt.

The Chief of Police said to the Mayor: 'Come on, my old – a Rolls-Royce, a station wagon, full of luggage, with a dead body. What? Believe me, old chicken, it is a piece of cheese. I will undertake to produce the goods, the corpse intact, and the criminal in irons, within twenty-four hours.'

Why he did not deliver will presently be demonstrated.

Meanwhile, Mrs Dedgeworth, who was walking in circles backwards to avoid an odour of garlic, had become hysterical, and was crying: '*Donnez-moi the corpse de mon husband! I do not demand pas mieux!*'

It must have been quite a scene.

The slowest-witted reader must have guessed what had happened. Taking advantage of what Dedgeworth called 'the whole kerfuffle', a respectable-looking man wearing a dark blue double-breasted suit and a chauffeur's cap had climbed into the driver's seat and driven the station-wagon away. It was not until later that a frenzied witness remembered that this man carried a bunch of about eighty-four keys on a ring, and appeared to be in a desperate hurry. The car disappeared in the dust, '– like an oiled phantom.'

The Inspector of Police said: 'If that is not Costaud, I will hang myself with my boot-laces, Name of a Name!'

His subordinates hoped that the Inspector was wrong, and might keep his word for once.

But the Inspector was right. The man in the chauffeur's cap was, indeed, Bubu-le-Costaud, one of the most daring car thieves in France. He had been a racing motorist in his youth, and it was said in the trade that if you put Bubu in a baby carriage, he would manage to get eighty kilometres an hour out of it. Bubu was one of those men to whose touch engines mysteriously respond: he loved them pas-

sionately; and they loved him in return, and obeyed him.

He steered the great car rather than drove her — they were in such perfect accord — at a hundred kilometres an hour on roads over which the most reckless driver would hesitate to ride at fifty. He made fantastic turns, heading for a certain place he knew. This was one of his clearing-houses. It had the appearance of a middle-sized farm with its usual complement of barns. But when Bubu sounded his horn in a certain way, the doors of the biggest barn slid back and Bubu drove into a large, efficiently equipped auto-repair shop.

The doors slid to behind him, and a man came forward to greet him, saying: 'Allo, *sacré* Bubu! What load of old iron have you brought me this time?'

'Allo, Jojo! This,' said Bubu, with emotion, 'is a beauty. I almost feel that if I could only keep her, I would never look at another car as long as I lived.'

'Well, she is better than a sardine tin,' Jojo admitted. 'Crammed with luggage, too. You have the luck of the devil . . .' Jojo had opened the door and was looking inside. '. . . Hand luggage fit for a king!'

'And by the way she rides, enough trunks in the boot for a maharajah!' cried Bubu. 'But what's in that big bundle on the back seat?'

'Soon find out,' said Jojo, pulling aside a blanket and flashing a powerful torch.

Then he withdrew with a yelp of terror, and said: 'Holy blue — it is an Egyptian mummy!'

Bubu said, encouragingly: 'If it is in good condition, I can get a good price for it . . . but I fear it is one of those things the Egyptians sell to tourists: papier maché, canvas and sawdust. Give us a light, old rooster — let's see——' He took the torch and looked more closely.

Bubu was a man of iron nerve. He stepped back and

said, in a small subdued voice: '— Jojo, take it easy. I'm sorry to have to inform you that it is a corpse. Now be calm.'

But Jojo's yells of execration might have been heard all over the countryside. I shall not attempt to paraphrase. He ended howling: 'Holy Mother, it only wanted this! I work, I slave—I risk my liberty—I risk my neck for this son-of-a-dog, and he thanks me by bringing a wagon-load of corpses——'

'—Calm, Jopo, calm. One can always dig a little hole——'

'—Oh, you kind of a donkey! If it was only the crate, it would be a routine investigation. But the corpse of some diplomat's wife?'

'How do you know?'

'Because, you ape, the licence number is a Corps Diplomatique one.' He slammed the door violently, motioning Bubu back into the driver's seat. 'Get that load out of here!'

'You might co-operate, Jojo.'

'Listen, you,' said Jojo, in an unpleasantly even voice, producing a heavy automatic pistol, 'I might as well have two stiffs on my hands as one. On your way!'

With perfect aplomb, Bubu said: 'I am not impressed by your ironmongery, Jojo. Put it away. In any case, I could break your arm before your safety-catch was down.'

Jojo looked to reassure himself that his safety-catch was not safe; in which split second Bubu-le-Costaud disarmed him, and said—cool as an Englishman: 'Fill her up, sweetheart, and check the oil. Also, the tyres. It is economic. I am disappointed in you, but I have your interests at heart, old pig: if you want me away with this load, which goodness knows I never meant to bear, you'd better give me the means of transportation. . . . Say, for

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example, I broke down a few kilometres from here? Hurry up. Much as I hate loud noises (I have Battle Fatigue), I am interested in machinery, and have never fired a Luger of nine millimetres. Eh?

Jojo did as he was told. 'Where are you going?' he asked, at parting.

- 'Where the monkey hides his nuts,' said Bubu, who no longer trusted him; and drove as he had never driven before – across country, through ravines – drove like a cold-blooded maniac to a certain cave in the mountains which he had happened upon thirty years ago. He had said nothing about this to his coadjutors. He was a prudent man, and knew that there is no more honour among thieves than among law-abiding men. Sad experience had taught him that there comes a time in the life of every man when he is glad of a place to hide – some little place that nobody knows. (Hence, even notable people have their *pieds-à-terre* in the country, and you might twist their arms before they gave you a clue to an address.)

Bubu-le-Costaud's hiding place in this locality was a great cave hidden by trees. It was inaccessible to any vehicle but that which was driven by Bubu himself – safe as houses, so long as the police did not pick up the tracks of the heavy car on the dry road. Here, luck held. He had no sooner braked the Rolls-Royce to a standstill in the cave, than a little whirlwind came up, such as one gets in those parts, and scattered the dust left and right for miles.

Now, having breathing space, Bubu decided upon a plan of procedure: he would lay the corpse to rest, respectfully, in the coldest and driest corner of the cave; leave the car there, and make his way on foot to the little, somnolent town of Zaid-sur-l'Ix. He had not the slightest inten-

tion, of leaving behind such etceteras as jewel-cases.

But, first things first. He picked up the body of the old lady. Then something happened that made him 'swallow his tongue', as he said afterwards.

The corpse of Mr Dedgeworth's aunt put its arms around his neck.

All he could think of saying was: 'What is the meaning of this?'

The corpse said: 'Where am I? It's very cold. Where is my chocolate?'

And Bubu replied: 'It would have been bad enough with a corpse. But alive! No, I mean to say, this is just a little bit too much!'

The old lady, holding him tightly, whimpered: 'I don't know where I am. I want to go home. I'm cold . . .'

Although *Costaud* means 'tough guy', Bubu was well-known for his soft heart, as well as for his iron nerve. He wrapped the old lady in everything he could find and said, in his execrable English: 'Dear lady, my old bird, I would light you a fire, but that is out of the question. The pigs would see the smoke.'

'Pigs?'

'That is to say, cops.'

'There is a picnic hamper in my car, surely, with a primus stove and everything . . . But what am I doing here?'

Bubu-le-Costaud, thinking very rapidly, said: 'Why, dear lady, as a matter of this, I fell passionately in love with you. That Englishman with the little round hat and his wife with teeth like a horse, they were not sympathetic to me. I drugged you and carried you away, because you are adorable——'

'— To a cave?'

'Naturally. Of course, to a cave. Where else?'

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She, remembering the works of Miss E. M. Hull, said: 'All my bones ache from the grip of your steel hands! . . . You will find everything in the hamper. Also, open the big black cabin trunk. My clothes are there. But, I have no keys . . .'

Bubu assured her that keys were the least of his troubles at the moment – his best friends should have such troubles – if the worst came to the worst, he could open a trunk with a hair-pin. He did as the old lady said, and stepped outside for a while, returning to find her fully dressed and wrapped in a sable coat.

'It's better than a picnic,' said Dedgeworth's aunt. 'It's like something out of a book!'

Bubu was pondering. He could hear a rattling and a throbbing high up in the air, and he guessed that the sky was black with helicopters and reconnaissance planes. A sensible man – Jojo, for example – would have killed the old lady with a spanner, and made his lucky, as the saying goes. But Bubu didn't have the heart to do this. Instead, having made something hot to eat and drink on the primus, he kept her warm, fell into conversation, and indicated to her that he was a man of somewhat irregular life. What would she? His parents would not allow him to marry for love – he left home and fell among evil companions – joined the Foreign Legion . . . Ouled Nail, and all that – came back, joined the *Résistance*.

She said: 'All the nice Frenchmen I ever met were in the *Résistance*. I'm so glad you were, Bubu.'

He replied, frankly: 'Darling lady, in Paris there are 5,000,000 people. To my certain knowledge, 4,999,999 were in the *Résistance*. The same applies to Lyons, Marseilles, Toulouse, etcetera. It seems to me, if you want my candid opinion, that Germany never occupied France: France occupied Germany. Eh, my little coconut? . . .

THE UGLY FACE OF LOVE

Although in Algiers out of a population of 315,210, I did meet three collaborators in a coffee shop. . . . Yes, my crooning pigeon, I was in North Africa because here, at the time, I did not like the atmosphere . . .'

'Poor Bubu! Did the Nazis persecute you?'

'Bitterly,' said Bubu. He had been double-crossed in the matter of a bullet-proof Mercedes-Benz; the *Feldwebel* had withdrawn his commission. 'But I was in the street-fighting in 1944,' he said, 'and I flatter myself I did my share of damage . . .'

'Tell me about it.'

'Oh no, little chicken, it is not for your ears!' cried Bubu. 'They are exactly like little cockle-shells. Ah, no, a fighting man lives hard—yes?' He was thinking of an occasion when, having helped himself to an armoured car, he ran over the foot of one of the U.S. Shore Patrol, and was under fire. The policeman's language, he reflected, was certainly not for the lady's ears.

But soon, Bubu said: 'My little banana, so long as you are okay, I am happy. For myself, I am in some trouble. First of all, I have abducted you. In order to do this satisfactorily, it has been necessary for me to steal a car——'

'— But it is *my* car, Bubu! You didn't steal it!'

'That helps,' said Bubu, tightening his belt which had somehow become loose. 'Even so, let them send me to prison. I don't care. I have compromised you. . . . Yet, if my intentions were not honourable, I will give you my written permission publicly to spit in my face, kick me in the pancreas, and call me a camel!'

Dedgeworth's Aunt Sara said that she would not dream of doing these things in any circumstances. 'Then marry with me!' cried Bubu. 'We will drive to Zaid-sur-l'Ix, and the *maire* shall make us One. What say, old hen?'

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She said 'yes' with a wicked twinkle, thinking presumably of her nephew and his long-toothed wife. Rummaging in the trunks, Bubu found a formal suit which was too large for him, and a new bowler hat which was too small for him. (But diplomatic bowler hats are always too small.) He found also a stiff collar, an Old Harrovian tie, and a pair of patent-leather shoes. It was the old lady who persuaded him not to wear full evening dress, in spite of his protest that a man does not get married every afternoon.

He coaxed the mighty Rolls-Royce out of the cave and on to the road, and up the mountain to Zaid-sur-l'Ix. Even the Inspector of Police of this slumbering town had been alerted: at all costs, there was to be returned to Marseilles an English diplomat's Rolls-Royce containing the corpse of the diplomat's aunt; incidentally, dead or alive, one Robert LaBlanche, alias Bubu-le-Costaud.

A gendarme who was removing wax from his cars with a bayonet did what they call a 'double-take'—first he saluted, then he leaped into the air and blew a whistle. But the car stopped outside the *Mairie*, and by the time the police force got into action, the *Maire* had his sash on. In half an hour Dedgeworth's aunt was Mrs Bubu-le-Costaud, and proud of it.

'I could not resist you because you're so beautiful,' said Bubu, with his eyes on the bonnet of the Rolls-Royce.

So they drove happily back to Marseilles. Bubu regarded this as another of his lucky escapes but when, on the way, the old lady said that she had heard that under French law a woman's property is her husband's, and told Bubu that she had a fortune of seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds—seven hundred and fifty million francs—for the first and last time in his life he stalled the engine.

Of the adventure, as such, there is little more to say:

THE UGLY FACE OF LOVE

it was all over the front page of the *Daily Express*, to the exclusion of Russia.

So Bubu-le-Costaud lives now the life of a country gentleman, near Northiam in Sussex. . . .

. . . Dedgeworth told me all this with some bitterness. He said: 'I mean to say, a bounder ought to be, at least, *mitigated*; but this one is simply *un!* . . . Of course, there was bad blood between my aunt and me. Refused to speak to us, matter of fact, for putting her body into the car like that. Death Certificate and all – how would she have liked it if I'd have buried her on the spot? I put it to her, and she saw it in that light, of course. She was going to cut off my allowance. But do you know, it was that out-and-out snurge that pleaded for me? . . .

'And every so often, what with the State of Things, when we need a few pennies, it is that miserable fellow who acts as go-between. Damn it, he *kisses* me! But my aunt and I are not on speaking terms. Oh buttercups – a man has his pride! Must draw the line somewhere, what? I will do anything within reason for my wife and children, but I will not in public call him "Uncle Bubu"!'

The Ugly Face of Love

Without being definitely repulsive, the most appalling face I ever saw belonged to a man named Love, who used to frequent the 'Plumbers' Arms in Lower Belgrave Street – that shabby-genteel, leather-elbowed, sooty-lunged little street which gasps and sobs the thick black breath of Victoria Station, and pays literally through the nose for the privilege of saying that it is in Belgravia and not in Pimlico, the taxi-drivers' nightmare, which is fifty yards away.

The Plumbers' Arms caters for what they call in the trade, 'a nice class of customer' – people who, whatever they do, carry one another's liquor like gentlemen and never have to be thrown out. Indeed, the only person I ever saw removed from the premises was, as luck would have it, a plumber; he came in drunk from repairing a drain and, brandishing a pipe-wrench, shouted: 'My bleeding money's good as any other bleeder's bleeding money!' Whereupon, Mr Robert Redwood, the landlord's son, who used to be a jeweller, scrutinised him through an invisible eye-piece, picked him up as it were with tweezers, and placed him at arm's-length upon the dark velvet of the summer night; so that this outsider did not for a moment cut off the flow of our conversation which, that evening, was about malaria.

Our conversation, I say. I claim the right to consider myself as a nice class of customer: Robert Redwood and I went to the same school, which was founded by Quintin

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Hogg for the purpose of keeping the sons of impoverished parents off the streets; he and I have the right to wear the same tie: maroon and bottle-green with a diagonal stripe. This right we waive, but we might exercise it if we chose. The Polytechnic is not exactly Slupworth but, slice it whichever way you like, maroon and bottle-green with a trace of silver is in better taste than the bruised-purple and black-eye mauve and electric-blue that the Old Slupworthians flaunt so that they may be distinguishable from Tom, Dick and Harry.

From the contemplative man with bowed eyes who stills his syndrome with dog's-nose at eleven-thirty, to the abstemious person who takes nothing but a ham roll and several square feet of space at one o'clock, when he does the children's crossword puzzle in last night's paper, almost everyone in the Plumbers' wears a tie – in other words, a label – carries an unsigned letter of introduction, as it were. Thus, someone who will not dare to throw a pail of water over you when you are burning, because you have not been introduced, will grab you by the shoulders and ask you if you remember Old Charlic, if you happen to be wearing the salmon-pink, nigger-brown, poison-bottle-blue and arsenic-green necktie of Saint Bedlam's.

I am entitled to wear several denominational ties: the crossed-pens-and-inkpot *argent* upon the field *azure* of the Press Club, the Old Polytechnic tie and the blue-red-and-blue of Her Majesty's Brigade of Guards – which last happen to be the colours of the University of Pennsylvania, give or take a certain brightness of tone here or there. So I learned from the ugly man whose name was Love.

I had put on the Guards' tie because I had to see my bank manager, and had nothing but prestige to fall back on. A great loneliness had come down upon me. My

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appointment was for a quarter to one, and I had half an hour to kill, so I 'vent to the Plumbers' for companionship. The saloon, bar was almost empty, the day being Wednesday, that razor-edge of a day when the steadiest customer looks abstracted and pretends to be in a hurry while he is feeling pocket-money for serrated edges.

The ugly man had come out of his dark corner to get another double whisky at the bar, and I noticed that he was wearing a tie identical in pattern to my own. Now several years previously, I had written a book about the Brigade of Guards, of which the central character was one Sergeant Nelson, who, to rally the spirits of nervous recruits, used to bellow: 'Hi-de-Hi!' They were expected to bellow in reply: 'Ho-de-Ho!' A certain Colonel (not a guardsman) was so captivated by this that he made a standing order of it; privates were commanded to greet N.C.O.s with a hearty: 'Hi-de-Hi, Corporal!' – to which the Corporal, or Sergeant, or whatever he was, had to answer: 'Ho-de-Ho!' Or perhaps it was the other way round. In any case, once that harmless bit of foolery became compulsory, it was bitterly resented by the whole battalion. Questions were asked about it in the House of Commons, and the Colonel was given another job in the Army. The practice 'ceased forthwith', and only the Guards kept it up for a while, off parade, just out of pig-headedness.

So I said to the ugly man: 'Good morning. Hi-de-Hi!'

He must already have had several doubles, for he replied with a little song, to the tune of 'John Brown's Body':

*'Hang Jeff Davis to a sour-apple tree,
Down went M'Ginty to the bottom of the sea,
She's my Annie and I'm her Joe,
So – listen to my tale of –
WHOA! –*

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‘— (~~May~~ ice today, lady? No?)
Pencil, pencil, Pennsylvania . . . !’

&c.

The ice⁶ being broken, he said: ‘Sit down and have a drink. That is, of course, if you’re not ashamed to be seen sitting down with me.’

I could only say: ‘I have a date in Sloane Square at twelve-forty-five, but I have time for a quick one. You could walk along with me, if you have nothing better to do.’

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘I don’t want your pity, you know. But thanks a lot.’

‘What do you mean, pity?’ I asked.

‘I appreciate it, but you don’t want to be seen walking about with me in broad daylight.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘look at my face.’

‘I have.’

‘What d’you think of it?’

I said: ‘I don’t. What is there to think of it? What d’you want me to say about it? If I said: “What’s the matter with it?” you’d read that two ways, and tell me either to mind my own business or not to be a hypocrite. . . . It’s a face. John Barrymore’s was more regular, perhaps. It’s a little unusual, as faces go; but it’s not a face that would haunt my nightmares, say.’

‘It haunts mine,’ said he. ‘Have you noticed how people avoid me, around here?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘But I have noticed how you avoid people.’

‘I don’t care to embarrass them.’

‘You embarrass yourself, that’s the trouble.’

‘So would you, if you looked like me,’ he said. ‘Funny part about it is, my name is Love. I was christened Simeon.’

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Naturally, everybody pronounced it with an *A*—*Simian*: I looked like a monkey, from the start; one of those proboscis monkeys, only much more so. The first word of three syllables I learned was “prehensile”—one of my uncles, who’d studied semantics, said he hoped, at least, that my smeller was prehensile. . . . My father gave him hell for that; told him that according to Thorburn, lots of great men had had receding foreheads, long noses and no chins; whereas big, knobbly temples were frequently a sign of mental deterioration. Not that I was stupid, you know? Only self-conscious, clumsy—it was expected of me. Apart from the way I looked, the only thing about me that surprised people was that I walked upright, and had the use of my thumbs. . . . Grow out of it, you may say? Put yourself in my position, and try it and see!’

I said to him: ‘Look here, Love——’

‘—Don’t call me that: everybody’d think you were being sarcastic. Call me Sim, if you want to call me anything at all.’

‘Sim, then. If you feel the way you do, why do you come here every day and sit and mope?’

‘I like people, if only to look at. But I have other reasons, besides; very personal reasons. Have another drink?’

‘Later. I must go to Sloane Square. Will you walk?’

‘Sure. You’re a writer: if you’re seen with me, people will probably think I’m a figment of your vivid imagination. . . . Do you know something? Once, in Naples, an Italian Count offered me a contract, thirty thousand *lire* a week, and a bonus, to strangle a duck under an amber spotlight every Tuesday and Saturday night in the Club Tollerentino . . .’

‘You told him to go to the devil, of course.’

‘Of course. I have means—enough to get by. I’m supposed to be British representative of Love Stencils, Inc.,

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Philadelphia. Kind of a sinecure: they want me out of the way, I guess; there's no business over here, and even if there were . . . well . . . Tell me something: do you believe a doctor has a moral right to suffocate a child at birth?'

'On the whole, no,' I said.

'There are exceptional circumstances, though,' said Love.

'Walk,' I said.

It is unhealthy to talk about your looks, whatever they may be. To a discerning eye, there is no such thing as physical beauty *per se*. The Spirit alone is beautiful, or otherwise, because it alone can inspire true love. The rest is nothing but vanity and advertising. A sour soul will eat through the purest profile like acid through a paper bag; but a tiger could not mar a face animated by a good heart. I have seen a famous beauty blasted forever in my eyes by one lightning-flash of petty disappointment; and I know a man without any face at all, who is kept out of sight in the hospital at Mortlake, whose remaining eye cries *Courage!*

I do not believe in beauty with a capital *B*. It is good to pin up in a barrack-room; not much more. Carve it in stone, and then what have you got? A shape, destined by its durability to be outmoded. I know a famous dress designer who hires the spitting image of the Venus de Milo to scrub his floors, while he plasters a species of zombie with purple hair all over the current fashion magazines. I know a coal-heaver who might have sat for the Apollo Belvedere, but whom no woman would touch with a barge-pole. And I know a sculptor who, desiring to make a carved representation of the *Released Spirit*, could do nothing better than cut out of sandstone something like Al Capp's *Shmoo*, with a hole in its chest.

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Handsome is as handsome does, and handsome does as handsome feels. The handsome deed is never self-conscious; the honestly lovable and therefore beautiful face should never be dismayed by its reflection in a mirror. It says, in effect: 'Take me or leave me; there is goodwill behind me.'

¶ Anyway, nobody but an actor sees himself as the world sees him – and that is in false-face. ›

Conscious ugliness has its sinful pride, as well as conscious beauty. Beware of the freak who makes an exhibition of himself – the four-hundred-pounder who wears flesh-coloured tights, the human skeleton who wears black tights – he hates the laughter that he inspires. He hates himself. Therefore, the odds are, he hates you. Most laughter is a matter of bared teeth and curled lips.

Now, as I may have indicated, my first thought about Sim Love was: 'Here is a fellow who offers the world an insurmountable mountain instead of the molehill that is himself; he makes too much of himself. It would be better if he made a laughing-stock of his ugliness, instead of enjoying it all by himself.' But it was not long before I became aware that he was sincere in what he said about his appearance – that he was too honest to twist a joke out of it. He had been brought up to regard himself as a sport of nature, and an embarrassment to his well-formed family.

'The doctor was blamed, at first,' he told me. 'All he could say was: "Well, after all, it *is* a baby." But afterwards it was agreed that I was just something that can happen in the best-regulated family. They kept me out of the way as much as possible, especially after my voice broke. You see, I had three unmarried sisters; and who knew but what things like me might run in the family? Why, I was too awful even to have a nickname, like Nosey, or Pushface, or

Waterhead, or the Drip, or the Missing Link . . .'

He said all this with great earnestness. 'My mother said that at least I didn't take after *her* side of the family; and my father said well, for that matter, I didn't take after any side of anybody's family; but so long as I walked upright and had the use of my thumbs it was to be presumed that I had an immortal soul. "Mendelssohn was a hunchback," he said, "and a Jewish person at that." Ever since my birth he had been reading up the histories of freaks, with a view to justifying me. He said: "Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was the son of one of the oldest aristocratic families in Europe, and a famous artist, and he had practically no legs. Dr Samuel Johnson had scrofula, and gasped when he ate: you wouldn't have had him at your dinner-table. Beethoven looked like a frog, and was deaf. Reid, the anatomist, was a midget — his arms were so short that he couldn't reach his collar-stud. Wait and see, my dear. Robert Louis Stevenson had T.B., Charles Dickens combed his hair at dinner-table in Boston. Schubert was this, and the other . . ."

'Father wanted to make a genius of me. Nothing came of it. I always had what they call a fairly good I.Q., but what I wanted was to be a man among men, like other men. But I was always a stranger. I might have been someone from Mars. I never fell into any human category. And I will admit, mind you, that I had largely myself to blame . . .'

When I asked Sim Love how this could be so, he said: 'Too suggestible, too sensitive. The closer I got to the age of reason, when I might have talked myself out of it, the deeper I reasoned myself into it. People were too damned polite to me. You know, being self-conscious all the time, I was accident-prone. I tripped over things. You know that legend of the man who asked the Pasha for the secret of

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success? The Patha gave him a vase filled to the brim with oil, and told him to walk through the crowded streets of the town without spilling a drop: if he spilled so much as one drop, there were two executioners walking behind him with drawn swords and orders to instantly decapitate him. Only nobody decapitated me. They would have laughed quite easily at anyone else falling into a dish of potato salad; but never at me. And the less they laughed, the more I was ashamed because they pitied me. Only if they had laughed at me, I'd have been the first to be resentful because they didn't understand me.

'Does this make sense to you?'

I said to Sim Love: 'Why not? Let us grant that you didn't have the kind of face they put in magazines to advertise collars with. What about it? Who has? And what for? How long can such a face last? How long is a man young? Say twenty years, perhaps. And his awareness of his good looks lasts how long? It takes fourteen years before he starts to count his pimples – as from birth – and only another sixteen or seventeen years before he addresses a twenty-five-year-old as "Son", and regards a mirror as merely something to shave in. . . . How old are you now?'

'Forty-five. Only you don't quite understand: I don't have even the memory of anything like a common face to look back upon.'

I said: 'As for being what you call "accident-prone", I've heard that before. First of all, you broke things because you didn't have to pay for them – you knew nobody would punish you. Then you went out of your way to knock things over to draw a little more attention to yourself; fishing for a stray sprat of understanding in a sea of pity. All people said was, "Poor Sim." Correct me if I'm wrong.'

'Well?' he said.

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'Well, naturally, the time had to come when people got used to you,' I told him. 'And then you had to hurt yourself. I'll bet you exhausted all the possibilities of falling into the potato salad, etcetera, before you were sixteen: after that, you started to draw blood. Am I right?'

'Not far wrong,' said Sim Love. 'When I was about fifteen there was a football player named Stony Marconi — one ear here, another ear there, and an upper lip like a rhinoceros — everybody was crazy about him. He was a Three-Letter man. His nose was all over the place, and he used to sing to himself; a silly song called "How Long Has This Been Going On?" About then I climbed too high up a pear tree, and fell through the branches. When I came out of the bandages, the general opinion was that I was, if anything, improved. . . . Why?'

'Only that you wanted to take revenge on yourself,' I said. 'You wanted to show signs of being hurt; something fresh. How did you happen to fall out of a pear tree?'

'I was climbing after a kitten that got stuck up there.'

'The kitten belonged to a girl?'

'Why, yes.'

'Stony Marconi's girl?'

'Oh no. She wished she were — they all did, at that time. She was my sister Alice's best friend. Her name was Olive; she married some fellow called Jefferys. Stony never amounted to much. Ended up somewhere . . .'

'And Alice?'

'Ah, Alice was my favourite sister. She understood me, I think. Alice stood by me.'

I said: 'As the saying goes, Sim, you are full of stuff. If you ask me, you are kind of proud of being ugly. You make a sort of luxury of it. If I had a face like yours——'

'Which Heaven forbid,' he muttered.

'If I had a face like yours, and was ashamed of it, I'd

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have done something about it. You're not a poor man, are you? Well then, if I were you I'd raise some money, and go to a plastic surgeon, and get myself straightened up. I mean to say, you have got a face, even though you may not like the shape of it. It isn't unalterable. And it's amazing what plastic surgeons can do, now. Take, for instance, that left eye of yours.'

Sim Love had what the gypsies call a *wofferty ogle* or what is more politely termed a swivel-eye. His left eye seemed to be trying to look away from his right; to cut it dead, disclaiming all knowledge of it.

'Take my left eye? You take my left eye. I don't want it. You can have it,' said Sim.

'A very simple operation would put it back to normal. Your nose, again . . .'

It resembled the famous nose of Mr Jimmy Durante, only it was bigger, and had been broken very badly so that it was twisted to the right. Yet the effect was neither comic nor sinister; only preposterous. As for his mouth, it made me think of what my mother told me when I was a little boy. I used to put a finger in each corner of my mouth and stretch it so that it was closed in the middle and wide open at the ends. 'If you don't stop doing that, you will stay like that,' she used to say. Sim, apparently, had stayed like that. And below this mouth his face simply fell away in a smooth slope to meet his Adam's apple.

'Oh I know, I know,' he said. 'But what if I did go to some croaker and have a few new features grafted on? I'd always know that it wasn't really *my* face I was showing to the world. There'd still be this damn freak underneath. I tell you, a face like mine warps your whole personality. It's hopeless. But thanks for the thought. I appreciate it. I'll tell you something. You asked me why I keep hanging around the Plumbers' Arms. Well, the truth is . . .'

no, you'll only laugh, you'll only laugh . . . Oh, I know you'd be too polite to laugh in my face (if you can call it a face) but you'd go away and tell people. No, I take that back. I apologise, I didn't mean to say that. You see, I even talk cockeyed. What I really mean to say is, if anybody knew, I'd be such a laughing stock I'd be driven away from the pub, and then I wouldn't have even that.'

'Even what?'

'Oh all right, I'll tell you. As a gentleman, you will respect my confidence. The truth is, I'm crazy about Peony.'

I saw nothing remarkable about that. Peony was one of those girls whose destiny is to drive men crazy. There is no harm at all in saying, even to your sweetheart or your wife, that such a girl is a peach, a dilly, a lulu, a smasher, or whatever superlative you happen to fancy. Peony was so extraordinarily beautiful that, while they envied her, women could not possibly be jealous of her. Somehow, they saw her in two dimensions with an autograph scrolled across her; they could visualise her with a tin-tack through her forehead, pinned to the wall of a hut, or on a screen in a sarong; but never as a menace to their menfolk. She was too perfect to be real. Your husband had to be a millionaire before you needed to worry about a girl like Peony. She was meat for Clark Gable, say; certainly not for the man in long underpants who guzzles porridge over the *Daily Mirror* and has trains to catch. She was the eternal pin-up girl. Aged men looked at her and thought of Lillian Russell; middle-aged men swore that she was the image of Clara Bow; the youngsters, looking at her, were not quite sure whom she closely resembled – Rita Hayworth or Ava Gardner – while we, who were in our late thirties, said: 'No, from the neck down, Betty Grable; from the neck up Rosebud Wilson.'

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In those days, Peony 'did modelling' for one of the great fashion magazines. (It would not look at her now; she has been outmoded by a species of Zombie, that should be lying on a bier with candles at head and feet, instead of walking about. 'Too many feminine attributes,' they would say, only in other words.) And she was a lady; her father was a retired brigadier. It was said that she had had offers of marriage from lords and millionaires, but she preferred to keep her independence. My opinion was, that men didn't propose to her because they did not dare. She was too beautiful. Girls like Peony – if there *were* girls like Peony – never got married. One read of their divorces – these one could, somehow, imagine. But marriage? Turning it over in your mind you said to yourself: 'Now, I mean to say, how would a man go about such a task?' Presumably, having screwed up his courage with drink or drugs, he would put the proposal in the form of a joke: 'Tell you what, Peony – why don't you marry me? Ha, ha! Ha, ha!' Whereupon she would say something like: 'Okay, Secret Passion; but do you mind if I finish my drink first?' Then, the suitor would say: 'Ha, ha! Jolly good!' And there the matter would end.

She managed, somehow, while being hail fellow well met with most of the habitués of the saloon bar at the Plumbers' Arms, to remain cool and aloof. The most scurrilous gossip could find nothing to say against her – except, perhaps, that she didn't behave as a normal woman should; which invariably meant that she had failed to return his glad eye, or managed to avoid his too-lingering hand-shake. She was likened to all kinds of desirable, succulent eatables; such as peaches, cream, honeyball melons, and so forth. A sanitary engineer, impressed by her cool whiteness, saw her against a background of American bathroom fittings; a visiting American from the South, looking

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for similes, said that she was like a silver julep cup covered with frost, but empty; an art student called her Galatea. In her spare time, she was taking lessons at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and it was whispered that she was going to have a screen test at Pinewood Studios.

'Go on, laugh,' said Sim. 'Get it off your chest, don't bottle it up.'

I said: 'Who isn't crazy about Peony? Why, when I was about sixteen years old, I punched a fellow schoolboy on the nose for saying that he, too, was in love with Lya da Putti. Soon after that I developed a passion for a Russian actress named Tumbelova, or something – until I settled down and went back to Dolores Costello. Everybody's crazy about Peony!'

'Crazy, yes; but not the same way as I am. I love her.'

'You'll get over it.'

'Like hell I will. I have half a mind to knock myself off.'

'Don't,' I said; and so we parted.

But a few days later I met Peony, who was window-shopping in Bond Street, and passed the time of day with her. One thing led to another, and, the conversation drifting to certain common acquaintances at the Plumbers' Arms, she said: '. . . They're a matey kind of crowd; darlings, all of them. But who's that rather plain fellow who sits in the corner? Why doesn't he ever talk to me?'

I said: 'He's too shy. He feels like a kind of outcast on account of his ugliness.'

'But how silly!' she said. 'I think he's rather cute. I mean, at least, he *has* got a face you'd look twice at. You know, the other day I carried on a conversation with Fred, under the impression I was talking to Harry – simply because they both wear the Royal Engineers' tie. I like a man to have *character*, don't you?'

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'Oh,' I said, 'Love has plenty of character.'

She thought that I was making some profound remark. 'It must have, I suppose, if it's the real thing,' she said. 'What's his name?'

'Love.'

'Introduce me, sometime,' Peony said.

And so I did. I had to drag him out of his corner before he shambled up, with a flaming face, treading upon the arthritic feet of Jack Redwood, the landlord, who uttered a piercing shriek; whereupon, Love upset a glass, tried to mop up the mess with a silk handkerchief, and overturned the table. But the introduction was effected, and Peony drew him into her circle. Her adorers looked on benignly. There was no danger here.

The next I heard of the affair was from an important-looking little man in a Royal West Kent Fusiliers' tie, who, because of his portentous air, was known as The Man The Empire Needs. Mulberry-coloured with rage, he was fidgeting in the lounge of the Old Soldiers Club, biting rather than drinking a tankard of beer. I cannot print exactly what he said, but it was something like this: 'That tripe-hound! That misbegotten snake! That person of doubtful ancestry! I'll batter the tripe out of him! I wish I had him in my Company! I'd murder the mongrel! Damn it, the man's a freak! Who the devil does he think he is, anyway? How does he earn his living? He's no good! He's an unmitigated rotter. And do you know something?'

He lowered his voice to a whisper. 'The man's a Yank!'

'Who is?'

'This fellow Love. Haven't you heard?'

'I haven't been around much lately. What's up?'

'Damn it, I always said that woman was abnormal! You haven't heard? I wish she was my daughter – I'd kick her out of the house – and I'd horsewhip that cur until he was

red, white and blue, the swine! You mean to say? No, but really! — they're engaged, confound and blast me! To be married, I mean! That squirt and that woman. Never mention her name to me again.'

'Not Peony?'

'That woman.'

'Do you mean to tell me he actually had the nerve?'

'Nerve be damned! She had the unadulterated shamelessness to propose to him!'

'Peony proposed to Love?' I asked, incredulous.

'Proposed? By the Lord Harry, Kersh, she chucked herself at his horrible head! You know, I mean to say — I really *do* mean to say!'

'You're a married man with a family,' I said. 'I don't see that it's any skin off your nose.'

'She was like a daughter to me,' he said. His face could not get any redder but it pulsated like a frog's throat. This, presumably, was his way of blushing.

What The Man The Empire Needs said was perfectly true. I went to the Plumbers' Arms and found the saloon bar seething like a pot. When I asked after Peony, the answer was, that they didn't know, and had more important things to think about. A few of the old reliables still hung around, hoping that she might change her mind at the last moment. The fact that she had proposed to Sim Love came as a shock to them all; it struck them as being, somehow, indecent. I saw Sim Love a few days later. He took me by both hands and squeezed them until my fingers stuck together, stammering broken expressions of gratitude.

'What have I done?' I asked.

'You brought us together. Oh, what a girl she is! What a girl! Most women would find me kind of homely! I used to be ashamed to be seen talking to any woman under

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seventy. But with Peony it's different. What a girl she is! She puts me at my ease. When she's around I can't think of anybody but her. I forget about myself absolutely – my face, I mean. We are going to be married next month.'

'She proposed to you, I hear.'

'Yes. What a girl! She isn't ashamed to admit it. She proposed three times, in fact. First time, I thought she was joking. Second time, I was so frightened I ran away and hid for a week. Third time, I said, "yes". She loves me because of my character, she says. Peony's crazy about character.'

'I'm sure I wish you joy,' I said.

'You must come to the wedding and be best man.'

'I can't, I'm afraid. I have a date in Jamaica.'

And so I had. I was three years abroad, but as soon as I returned, I groped my way through a dense fog straight to the Plumbers' Arms. On the way, I walked into a lamp-post and asked it why it didn't look where it was going; a man, riding a bicycle on the pavement of Buckingham Palace Road, under the impression that he was in High Street, Tottenham, knocked me over; an old lady carrying a torch, like a miniature Statue of Liberty on the loose, trampled me underfoot. The fog was so dense that there were haloes around the electric bulbs in the saloon bar. Most of the customers were down with forty-eight hour 'flu, Bob told me. The Man The Empire Needs had fallen dead, trying to win a bet that he could drink sixty two-ounce glasses of bottled beer at one-minute intervals in sixty minutes: he had been warned that this was impossible, but had insisted on trying; and so perished at the fifty-seventh glass, suffocated with froth.

'And what about Peony?' I asked.

'Mr Love had something done to his face,' said Bob, in his discreet way. 'Lifted, or something, I believe.' And

even as he spoke the door opened and Sim Love came in.

I knew him only by the set of his somewhat awkward shoulders and his extraordinarily deep voice. Otherwise he was unrecognisable. He had a chin. His nose was like any other nose, his mouth was of the usual size and shape, and his forehead appeared higher and his ears lay flat.

'Hello,' he said; ordered drinks and went straight to his old corner and sat in his old place, crouching in his old familiar attitude so eloquently expressive of shame. I said to him: 'What's happened to you? And how's Peony?'

'I don't know. We're divorced.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. How come?'

'Oh, it was my fault, I guess. I never could leave well enough alone. It was marvellous, at first. Everything was terrific. Peony made me blossom out. I really got to enjoy being in company. We went to parties, first nights, everything. She was proud of me. Said I had character. Of course, next to me, she looked ten times more beautiful than before, if that was possible. We got along fine. I owe a lot to Peony — she gave me a real interest in life. I had been a prisoner inside myself, before; she opened a kind of door I didn't know was there and let me out. Happy isn't the word for what Peony made me. I didn't know what to do to please her. And I finally got around to your way of thinking. I said to myself: 'After all, looks don't really matter. It's the spirit that counts. What a fool I've been! The time really has come for me to regard this funny face of mine as a thing of the past.' In other words, I decided to go and have my face off, as soon as I could afford it. But, I dare say you know, these facial operations cost the devil of a lot of money.

'Well, it happened, after we had been married nearly a year, that my aunt Arliss died in Philadelphia and left me

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a whole lot of junk. Her money, which didn't amount to very much, was equally divided among her nephews and nieces. Her house and furniture—she had some valuable Colonial stuff—went to this one and that one, and I was stuck with the books and the papers; about half a truck-load of the stuff. You know, bound volumes of the *American Gentlewoman*, thirty-two volumes of Podger's *Sermons*, seventy-eight volumes of the *Transactions of The North American Sutralapscrian Society, 1862 to 1900* . . . all that kind of stuff. She never threw anything away.

'I called in one bookseller and he said that he would take the stuff away if I paid him fifty pounds. I tried giving the stuff away, but nobody would have it. At last, a man I know, who used to work for Sotheby, started rummaging around, and all of a sudden he let out a yell, and hauled out a big battered old book and said: 'I'll be damned if this isn't a First Folio Shakespeare!' And so it was.

'Then we began to go through the load, book by book, and you'd be surprised at the treasures we dug up. There was a first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a first edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and a Gutenberg Bible, to name a mere few. There was an Audubon's *Birds of America*, in mint condition, too. At a conservative estimate, that dusty old load of books was worth about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars: call it fifty thousand pounds.

'Then the papers. There were hundreds and hundreds of bundles of old letters. Some of the autographs were worth a pretty penny, because the old lady had kept not only her own letters but her grandfather's. But far more valuable than these were the stamps on some of the old envelopes. One of the family had gone to Mauritius, way back, and on a letter from him asking for a loan of a hundred dollars to get home with, there was the famous

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twopenny stamp, worth about twelve thousand dollars. On another letter from a relative in Louisiana there was a perfect Red Picayune stamp; there's only one other Red Picayune in the world, and that's imperfect. Twenty-two thousand dollars. And on a letter from a Sutralapsarian preacher in Africa – Cousin Jabez Love, who tried to convert the Boers, and got shot in the stomach in an argument over a point of doctrine – there was a perfect old triangular Cape of Good Hope stamp. They fetched, all together, nearly twice as much again as the books had done. So I was rich.

'Now I could put money into a show starring Peony. So I did. It was called Little Miss What's-It. Incidentally, it ran four days. But while it was being got ready, which took months, I said I had to attend to important business at home, and I went to Philadelphia and got hold of Doctor Pumpernickel, who is just about the best plastic surgeon in the business. I said to him: "Doctor, I give you *carte blanche*. Take my face and do something with it." And so he did. It took a long time, and it hurt like hell, but I didn't mind, because it was for Peony.

'So, when the time came for me to look at myself, after the last bandages were taken off, I was surprised and delighted. Here I was, at last, with a regular every-day face – the sort of face you might see on a man who sells roofing, say. I showed it to my family, and they were delirious, they were so pleased. My uncle suggested I come home to Philadelphia and start taking business seriously. But I was itching to get back to Peony . . . I don't believe I had both my feet on the deck for more than five minutes at a time all the way across, I was so impatient. I would have flown, only there might have been a crash, and I was afraid of getting my face all spoiled.

'Well, the long and short of it is, I came home.'

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Sim Love sighed and ordered another drink. I asked: 'What did Peony say?'

'Well, she looked at me for a long time and said: "Oh Sim!" I said: "How do you like it, darling?" She said: "I don't like it, Sim. Now, you're just a man like any other man, and I don't like just any other man. I married a freak, Sim, and you've given me a mediocrity. Oh Sim, why did you do it? Couldn't you have it put back again?" I couldn't, of course. And the marriage broke up as from that moment. I guess Peony liked me for my ugliness alone. She was a wonderful girl, but she must have had a shallow character, really, to be so much influenced by mere looks.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I suppose she must.'

'Not a word against her!' cried Love. 'I've remarried since then. Here is her picture.'

He opened his wallet and showed me a snapshot of a pale-haired girl in a high-necked black dress. I thought that her expression was vapid, that she had a sheep's mouth, and that her eyelids were half a size too large. But I said: 'She looks nice.'

He said: 'She *is* nice. Comes of a very good family. Her father is *Sir* Decimus Masters – he was knighted for the work he did on the Committee for the Suppression of Vice; you know, pictures, books, theatres, smoking, coloured comics, beer, and all that. She's pretty active too – Society for the Abolition of Corporal Punishment . . . or is it Nylon? She is a woman you really respect. As soon as she comes into a room, people start holding their breath in case they smell of cigarettes or liquor. She's a perfect wife.'

'Will she approve?' I asked, pointing to his glass.

'My goodness, no! She must never know anything about it. In case you meet her, better tell her we met in the Y.M.C.A. . . . although she regards that as a bit of a fast organisation, too. Actually, I don't drink. I'm not really

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drinking now, I'm tapering off. You see, I had to go to Glasgow on some business, and somehow I got drawn into a kind of party with some fellows. I only just got in. I'm not due home until tomorrow, so I thought I'd . . . not have a drink, exactly, but straighten myself out. This isn't drinking, this is homoeopathy. Then I'll go to a Turkish Bath and get a good face massage afterwards,' said Sim Love, furtively looking at himself in the mirror that advertises Bach's Lager. 'For how could I possibly face Deborah with these great pouches under my eyes?'

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Imagine an old white Boston bulldog wearing pince-nez, a string tie and a portertous collar: such was Mr Penumbra, the great lawyer, the King of Fixers. It was September; the goldenrod was in bloom, to which Mr Penumbra was allergic. It gave him a kind of asthma, so that, as he sat down trying to draw a whole breath, you might have imagined there was something wrong with the springs of the great, brocaded chair. But the noise came from Mr Penumbra's chest. Too tired for bitterness, he reflected, with mild irony, that he who had in his day wrung so many gallons of tears from jurymen, would willingly pay a thousand dollars for one deep sigh of his own this afternoon.

Then a discreet little silvery clock struck three, and a discreet little silvery manservant came in and said: 'Mr Bottomley is out of his shower, Mr Penumbra. He will see you in five minutes.'

'Tell Mr Bottomley I'll wait ten minutes; no more,' said Mr Penumbra, playing with a platinum watch set with his monogram in white diamonds: a gift from some woman who had murdered her husband, and whom he had got off scot-free . . . True, she had shot him four times in the chest, but with a hair-trigger automatic. Penumbra proved conclusively that the first shot was fired in self-defence – the other shots were nervous reflexes . . . Acquitted? Why, the woman became a national heroine, almost! . . .

Mr Penumbra was inclined to open one of the water-

tight compartments of his mind, relaxed as he was in the great air-conditioned room. But here was business. Reminiscence could wait for his *Autobiography*. Still he watched the time of day: no man kept Penumbra waiting more than five minutes.

The manservant came in, and said: 'Will you come this way, Mr Penumbra, if you please?'

He led the lawyer into a vast bedroom. Ira Bottomley had the biggest bed in the city: it was circular, twelve feet in diameter. Perhaps he needed it, for he was an immense figure of a man — six foot five in his slippers — and an uneasy sleeper; to judge by the evidence of the twisted blanket and crumpled sheets, he writhed in his sleep.

Mr Penumbra observed (he missed nothing) that the immense triptych of looking-glass was shattered in the middle panel, while below it on the carpet, among shards of heavy glass, lay a broken bottle and a litter of pills. His breakfast lay uneaten in several chafing dishes. He was busy with a bottle of champagne. As soon as he saw Mr Penumbra, he got out of his chair and asked: 'What now, Penumbra?'

'What, don't you remember?'

'Not a thing, after I left the Abracadabra Club. Why?'

'Remember hitting somebody?'

'Vaguely. Why? What's the matter?'

'It happened to be a woman you hit.'

'Well?' said Ira Bottomley, without much interest.

Mr Penumbra said: 'She was a beggar.'

'Oh, send her a hundred dollars,' said Bottomley.

'She happens to be a blind beggar, Boy.'

'Oh, Lord!'

'You knocked her down. She hit her head on the sidewalk. She's got concussion.'

'Oh no!'

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'Yes. Furthermore, she's paralysed in the legs from polio. God knows how I can fix this one. The hit-and-run affair in Georgia was child's play to this——'

'— The kid ran into the road right under my wheels!'

'We know all about that. But this . . . well, the last straw breaks the camel's back, Boy.'

'What d'you mean?'

'I mean, there's a limit to everything. Even fixing. See that mirror you seem to have smashed? Give me cement and I can fix it, though it maybe might not reflect so nice. Smash it again and I can fix it again. And so on. But there comes a time . . . a last time . . . if you get what I mean.'

'Boy' Bottomley got what he meant. He muttered: 'Fix this, Penumbra, fix it. Take *carte blanche*. It was an accident, I slipped; I slipped on a banana-skin and threw my hands out to save myself. What, strike a woman? Me? And a crippled beggar at that? . . . I slipped, Penumbra. Hey?'

'With a right cross like Gene Tunney you slipped, Boy. They all say so.'

'“They all”? There were witnesses?'

'Bet your life.'

'Oh, for God's sake, Penumbra, fix 'em!' Ira Bottomley added, in an undertone: 'I'd been taking some crazy pills — Mescaline, or something.' He pointed to the smashed mirror and the broken bottle of pills. 'I thought that woman was Daphne . . .' He was referring to one of his wives.

'I'll want a cheque,' said Penumbra. 'I'll fix it, don't worry. But——'

'— Never again, Penumbra, I swear! Let me steady up my hands a little, and I'll write a cheque for whatever you like. Have some champagne? No? Only don't go just yet,

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Penumbra. Look; that business last night's nothing. Something else, last night, shook the hell out of me. I can't get it out of my head. Listen——'

'Not something *else*!' cried Mr Penumbra.

'It was a strange kind of dream,' said 'Boy' Bottomley.

'Not within my jurisdiction. See an analyst.' Penumbra was interested, however; he had never seen his client so deeply moved. '. . . If you make a supper of Mescaline and champagne cocktails——' he began. But 'Boy' Bottomley begged him so urgently to listen, that he sat back with a cup of coffee on one of his fat knees.

'A dream such as I never had before,' said 'Boy' Bottomley.

So, opening a fresh bottle, he went on:

. . . It was only a dream, of course, thank God! You may be right, Penumbra—maybe I might look up an analyst at that. But in this dream I was walking up a road between two hills, and I wanted very badly to get off this road, you understand, because it didn't have any perspective. Two things add up to cold nightmare: a road without perspective, and a pit without a bottom. Anyway, I walked until I met an old man.

I supposed he was some old servant of the family that owned the property—he was trimming grass with a great reaping-hook on the left-hand side of the road as I went up—and he asked me where I was going. I said: 'No idea.' Then he said: 'I thought as much, son. 'Ware the Terraces!'

I asked him what terraces, but then the mist came down. It was like being wrapped in cotton, wet cotton . . . You've had fever, I dare say; you know how it shifts from something commonplace to something out of this world. It distorts. I was afraid of the dark like a man in a high

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fever. I began to run, in a panic, straight ahead, and all the time I had the idea that there was something flopping like a toad behind me, just within jumping-distance of me.

But then I got to the top of the hill, and the mist was all below me. The weather was a kind of heat-haze, like opals, and I had a feeling of tremendous relief; so I sat down to smoke a cigarette.

About then, I heard children's voices. They were good to hear. I looked about me. Down in the valley, mist. Over the hill, mist. To my left, rock. To my right, a little wall. A little wall, no higher than my hip, vertical on the road, but sloping in an easy curve, like a kid's slide, on the other side. From below I could hear the kind of noise young people make when they're having a good time. You know, Penumbra, I like youth . . .

('I know. Your liking for youth cost you \$75,000 in California once upon a time,' said Penumbra.)

. . . I don't mean *that*; I mean to say I like being young. There's so much before you, so many new things. Looking over that wall I felt young again, especially when I noticed a sign that said K E E P O U T ! You know how it is, Penumbra; you may have peaches and Cranshaw melons for the asking, at home, but you'll risk your neck to steal a sour apple.

The old man with the sickle said: 'I warned you — 'ware the terraces, son.'

But my leg was already over the wall, and then I was falling, or rather, sliding down. It wasn't like falling in a nightmare; it was something like your first ride on a roller coaster — a kind of fear that's pleasant because you know there's nothing to be afraid of.

I landed with a gentle bump on a springy lawn, and there were hundreds of kids, fifteen or sixteen years old,

playing in the sun. Most of them were in swim-suits, but some of them, the older ones, had on zoot-suits and hand-painted ties, and were practising the most complicated kind of dance steps with beautiful girls dressed in those funny little denim pants that come to just below the knee; that, and a bra. The others were playing tennis, and handball, and baseball, and all that.

Penumbra! I've seen Ty Cobb, I've seen Babe Ruth, I've seen Joe diMaggio, but-I swear I've never seen baseball played like those kids played it! The pitcher was out of this world, but the boy with the bat hit seventy-five home runs in succession, until he got bored and deliberately stood aside and let the ball slap into the glove; dropped the bat, and came towards me saying: 'Kid stuff! I'm thirsty.'

And so was I.

He said his name was Lancelot, but they called him Butch for short. Butch was tired, he said, of this 'kid stuff'. You couldn't win and you couldn't lose: everybody was as good as everybody else, at baseball, football, handball, tennis, bowling – even *jai-alai*, which is supposed to be the fastest game on earth. They were all perfect; there was the trouble.

And it appeared to me that the faces of these youngsters were old before their time. In the middle of a game, the tennis-players would throw down their racquets; the ice-skaters would glide to the edge, having outdone Sonja Henie, and slouch away; the boxers would pause, shrugging, in the tenth round, having fought to a draw, and go away to the drug-store for soda and ice-cream. This was the place my baseball batter took me to.

It seemed, in this dream, that the counter was half as long as Broadway. Scores of soda-jerks were busy, putting out sundaes and what not, the like of which you never saw

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in this world . . . unheard-of flavours, strange fruits. I drank some cola drink through a straw, and ate a sundae they called a *Gloria*. The young girls were clinging to me, but they had no appeal; I felt old, suddenly.

And now, one of the zoot-suiters came up to me and said: 'Say – want a *real* drink?' He took a big silver flask out of his hip-pocket, and offered it to me. It was bourbon. And here was a curious thing: that boy poured and poured and poured and still the flask was full. It must have been made to hold a pint. He poured a good two quarts out of it; and all the time he poured the stuff out . . . and still the flask was full. You understand, it was only a dream? , , ,

('Freud is dead. See Dr Humperdinck,' said Mr Penumbra, looking at his watch.)

. . . Be patient, Penumbra. What the devil do I pay you for? Well, all of a sudden, this zoot-suiter threw his flask at one of the mirrors in the soda fountain, and shouted: 'What the hell – I'm going over the Wall!'

'I'm with you,' said the baseball player; and several boys and girls said: 'We're coming, too!'

I said: 'I'm game, kids. How do we go about it?'

'Over the Wall, and slide,' said the zoot-suiter. 'Simple as that.'

Now, out of the blue, I remembered the old man with the reaping-hook, and I wanted to get back to the road. I tried. But you know these slides: you simply can't climb *up* them. The kids laughed and laughed as I tried and tried to climb that curved slope. 'It can't be done!' they shouted. 'You can come, sure; but try and see if you can go! You try it and see!'

I tried. It couldn't be done. I've climbed the Matterhorn, but here there was no hold for finger or foot, even if I'd had a guide and a rope and an alpenstock. That

slide was like glass and oil. So I put a good face on it and said: 'It's fun, I agree. Fun trying, kids, but it pays no dividends. Let's slide.'

The zoot-suiter was the first. He made a dance movement and vaulted over the parapet on to a somewhat longer slide. 'Yippee!' he screamed as he went down. 'Zowie!' Then came the echo of a long, low whistle – what they call a 'wolf-call' – so that everybody knew he had landed safe and sound. Many of the other young ones followed him, yipping and zowieing.

I went last, but I somehow didn't yip or zowie; and I landed softly, again, on turf, after a long adult's slide that felt very good. But long! I could see there was no way of getting back to the road that way. But – I know my mountains – the trick is, getting to the foot, which is a devil of a sight harder than making the peak. You know? In the end, there *must* be a plain; terra firma; a town, etcetera.

Now, Penumbra, the place I found myself in was something like one of those plush suburbs, full of lovely country houses in every style from Tudor to all-glass. At first I thought I was in Greenwich, Connecticut . . . then, the Main Line of Philadelphia . . . then, again, Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans . . . I didn't know where I was. Picture a perfect autumn afternoon one Saturday in Greenwich – say.

You understand, it was only a dream?

Well, there came up to me an elderly gentleman, who said: 'Bottomley, I believe?'

'Who told you?' I asked.

'Oh, I knew,' said he, with a kind of senile giggle. '"Boy" Bottomley, I believe. Yes?' I agreed.

'Proud to know you,' he said. 'Have a drink?'

'Be delighted,' I said, and he took me to one of the

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elegant houses that was set up like a country club, and ordered double dry martinis, mixed exactly right.

'Lunch?' he said.

'I filled myself up with sundaes up there on the other terrace, but I think I could use a—

'—A planked steak!' this old fellow said. *I'd meant to say just that.* 'We'll have a planked steak,' he said, 'and a bottle of Burgundy out of this world!' And there it was, almost before the words were out of his mouth. There never was such steak. It was only a dream, ha? And never was such wine. Of what vintage or anything, the devil knows. Afterwards, cheese such as you eat in a dream, and port; I wish I had a thousand dozen of that port! We drank four bottles, and then some wonderful brandy, and smoked a special kind of cigar.

The peculiar thing was, I didn't get drunk. Neither did my host. His name was Filbert, and he had a tired, far-away look. He told me a dozen funny stories I'd never heard before—I wish I could remember them.

'Now, look here,' I said to Filbert, 'when do I return a little of this hospitality?'

But Filbert was looking at other men in this country-club kind of place. '. . . See that man in the black suit? Kind of like a buzzard? Old fellow, wrinkled neck, long nose, pink face? . . . He's concerned with bonds . . . I could tell you some lovely stories about him! And the other one—kind of low forehead, brown hair, sharp English manner—there again. Wears a derby hat, buttons himself up to the neck. Wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him over my shoulder. Stick around and you'll find out. . . . Like hunting?'

I said, yes, I was considered quite a shot. But what game was there hereabouts? Old Filbert said: 'Like to have a crack at an eleven-foot silver-tip bear?'

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I thought he was drunk. I said silver-tips might touch eight foot, or nine. Eleven? No.

Filbert said: 'Would you like to bet?'

I said: 'Bet? Why, I'll bet you a thousand dollars you can't show me an eleven-foot silver-tip bear. They don't grow that big, and anyway, this is too far south.'

He said: 'Okay. A thousand it is——' But there was a tiredness about him that took all the spice out of the bet. '—I'll meet you six o'clock tomorrow morning, right here.'

'But,' I said, 'I haven't got clothes; I haven't got guns.'

'Oh, you'll find all that in your suite, right here.'

So we parted and an attendant took me up to a kind of penthouse where there was a closet full of clothes of every description that might have been made for me in Savile Row, and a cupboard full of guns of every calibre. And in this dream—it was only a dream, Penumbra—in this dream I slept deep, and when I woke up there was a hatchet-faced servant waiting on me with breakfast. My clothes were all laid out; rifle and cartridge-belt, too. He helped me dress. I took my rifle, went downstairs, and there was Filbert, chewing something over a cup of black coffee, dressed in a red and blue mackinaw and a peaked cap. He was yawning as if he had only just got up, or was just going to bed.

('Keep it crisp,' said Mr Penumbra, twirling his watch.)

All right, Penumbra . . . I went with this fellow Filbert into the woods. 'What, no guide?' I asked. Filbert said: 'No need, no need.' And after a little while we started the biggest silver-tip bear that ever was—twelve foot on his hind legs, believe me or not. Filbert said: 'Take first shot,' and of all things, grounded his rifle and started picking his teeth with a little gold gadget, while the bear charged.

I let it get to within fifty feet before I fired, and I hit

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exactly in the left eye. He slithered forward under his own impetus when he fell, and his muzzle touched my boot. I looked to this fellow Filbert for a word of congratulation. His back was towards me, and he was whittling a stick with his hunting knife. When I asked Filbert what about the skin, he yawned and said: 'Oh, leave him for the buzzards. He's only a junior bear. There's bears twice his size in these woods; regarding which, I think you owe me a thousand dollars since this bear measures well over eleven feet.'

I gave him a cheque then and there, and he poked it casually into one of his pockets. I said: 'You know me? Bottomley – the one they call "Boy" Bottomley. My paper is good, I trust?'

Then Filbert said something that somehow made my blood run cold. He said: 'Matter of fact, I couldn't care less,' and took me back out of the wood and down into the town, where I changed for dinner. We didn't bother to skin that bear.

You might think this was a nice dream. It wasn't. I changed. I dined. There was some dancing. But there was a kind of fright getting hold of me. Here, in this place, was just about everything most people work for . . . a kind of free-and-easiness, under a sort of etiquette which makes it somehow empty. They were hot on protocol and all that – there were distinguished personages there – but wherever you looked some fellow's wife was whispering to somebody else's husband; and his wife was looking at Tom, Dick or Harry with eyes like glowing coals. I wanted to go to sleep, but Filbert said: 'Sleep? Don't be silly, it's Saturday night. Sleep!'

Then we danced, and there was a lot of whispering and giggling; and, I don't know how it was, although there was nobody around under the age of forty, I felt awfully old;

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although I'm only thirty-nine. Eventually, it seems, I got to bed, and slept a little – sleeping within a dream and dreaming within a sleep within a dream, which adds up to bloody nightmare – until that hatchet-faced man brought me coffee and stuff; and I had a shower, and dressed in tweeds, and went down to a second breakfast.

Nobody had a hangover. Everybody was lively. A British statesman was having cold grouse and a silver tankard of strong ale; some slow-talking man, in a black coat, was eating bacon and eggs, corn cakes and sorghum and ketchup. It makes me sick to think of it. The horrible part of it was, I felt so old and they seemed so young. Yet I was the youngest of them all. The conversation was pretty lively, for breakfast. It was nearly all in whispers. Joanna had done this, Celia had done that, Betty had done the other . . . always confidentially, between us . . . you know? What time every man whispered to every other man about some other fellow's operations, and what not. The whole breakfast-room hissed with whispers and bubbled with giggles; and I felt lonely.

Soon Filbert came up to me and said: 'You ride, I take it? Today's Saturday.'

I said: 'Wait a minute – yesterday was Saturday, surely? How long does your week-end last?'

Then Filbert said: 'I don't know. Indefinitely.'

'How long have you been here, Filbert?'

'I can't say,' he said, 'I can't say. It feels like a thousand years.' Then he whispered: 'I'm an old man, my friend, a very old man. And to tell you the truth, brother, I am strongly inclined to get out of here, over the wall.'

I said: 'Here is a set-up I can't say I like. What's down below?'

The old fellow said: 'The rumour is, something like an earthly paradise. But I don't know. I'm going to try it,

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though, because I've had enough of this. Yes, maybe I'll take the Big Slide. . . . You like to hunt? The Hunt goes out this morning. Don't waste your time: everyone will be neck and neck with the hounds, and come back chattering the same old chatter; and there'll be a ball, and everybody's breath will be in someone else's ear. . . . Friend, I'm off. Come?'

I said: 'Oh hell, surely there must be a way *up*?'

This Filbert said: 'Nope. No way up to the road. But there is a way to the next Terrace. Everything your heart desires, there, presumably. Lots of 'em go.'

'What do they say?' I asked him.

He said: 'They don't come back, and I don't blame them. I don't get it, quite. Where we are now would seem to be a sort of paradise for tired business men, that work only so as to get leisure to play. My father — he was Filbert Utilities — used to tell me that the thing to do was, play in order to get the leisure to work. Perhaps he was right. Dunno. But I tell you this: I'm going over the Wall to the next Terrace, if only for the sake of the change. I'm bored. And you?'

'I'm game,' I said. 'This is kind of bourgeois. Anything for a change, Filbert. Shall we go?'

'Let's go.'

So we went over this other little wall, down the next slide, to the other terrace. They gave me going-away presents: a hand-painted tie by Picasso, a case of sixty-year-old Scotch, a pot of fresh Beluga caviar, and a bathrobe made of some very rare soft stuff — you could pull it through a wedding-ring, the lady said, demonstrating with a little giggle and a little glance, while her husband whispered with a heavy-eyed ash blonde.

I looked back, once. All their faces were haggard. Then we gathered impetus — it was like a Cresta run, without

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the danger, I heard voices crying up above and behind me; but they died away; and all their gifts went skittering away. We came to ground, again, on turf, and a man was waiting for us.

He looked like a synthesis of every major-domo you ever saw. He said: 'Mr Bottomley? Your suite is ready, sir, and your clothes laid out. What may we offer you, by way of amusement, this afternoon?' He looked at a little list, and went on: 'Roman Holiday—fifteen Christians and ten Nubian lions—two o'clock? Naval battle on the Great Lake at three? Auction of slaves at four? . . . But first, of course, you will want to change. Or perhaps you would like to gamble? Roulette? Chemin-de-Fer? Baccarat? Twenty-Four Card Poker? Dice? Horses? Girls? . . . Ah, but no doubt monsieur is tired of such games. He would like to visit the Palace of Seven Hundred Pleasures?'

Staring at him, I found myself in a magnificent suite—what the woods, the fabrics and the metals were, I don't know. My tweeds disappeared, and I was dressed in some shiny stuff that you couldn't feel. I heard myself saying: 'What seven hundred pleasures? You're crazy!'

'Our tallest building, sir, is the Palace of Seven Hundred Pleasures,' said this major-domo, or whatever he was. 'Are you sure you are ready for it so soon, sir?'

'Ready for anything,' I said.

'It could be that your mind might not be attuned,' he said.

'I gather that I go up, not down,' I said.

'Seven hundred storeys, sir, if you please.'

'Up!' I said, because I had gotten uneasy about those slides. '*Up!*'

And so this fellow took me to a building, the top of which was higher than I could see, and said: 'Good-bye.'

'What d'you mean, "good-bye"? ' I asked. But he was

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gone with a bow and a smile, and I was in the Palace of Seven Hundred Pleasures . . .

(Mr Penumbra growled: 'What "seven hundred pleasures"? Name me ten!'—always playing with his watch.)

. . . I don't know; I can't say; but there came a time when I found myself shivering on the fiftieth floor. There were sounds I couldn't hear, colours I couldn't see, and always another flight above me. At last I got to the top. And what was there? An empty room and an open window.

I looked out of the window and saw, smaller than fruit-flies, a crowd of people. The whole five thousand of them, from where I was, you might have put in a thimble! And I was horribly lonely—I didn't want to live.

I went to the window, and I jumped.

And I floated down like a bubble, and landed in a crowd of young people of all ages, laughing their heads off. 'What's this?' I asked; but they laughed, and danced away. Only one man was left; an old sort of young man, who said to me: 'You are pretty new, for this place, to take the jump from the seven-hundredth floor of the Palace of Pleasure?'

I said: 'I want to go home'

He asked where, and I didn't know. I said I had thought I was climbing, not falling. He said: 'Can be the same thing; can't fall without climbing.'

'Yes,' I said, 'but what's the idea?'

'I don't know,' this man said. 'Can't climb without falling.'

I asked him: 'Where do we go from here?'

He said: 'Could take the Last Slide. Half a mind to.'

'And what's the Last Slide?' }

'Nobody knows,' he said. 'But I'm going to take it. This

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is what you might describe as the Land of Heart's Desire; the Paradise of Children. This whole business of sliding down to grow up is fantasy, brother—a kid's comic. I went out, into the wind and the rain; and so help me, I'm going, though I don't mind telling you I'm scared: after all this, where *can* you go? But I'm going. Keep me company?'

I said: 'You bet!'—and followed him.

It seemed that a score or more followed us, laughing, and saying they'd be seeing us. One feverish-looking man, who might have been thirty or sixty, said to me: 'Let a fellow know how it is down there.'

'Sure,' I said.

I went down in an avalanche of parting gifts, which seemed to blow away. This Last Slide was a long one, and the feeling of falling, this time, wasn't so pleasant: there was fear in it, and the Slide went in spirals, round and around. At last, I heard my friend, who had taken off a little before me, yell: 'No! —No! —NO!' And looking, I saw what we were headed for. No terrace out of a fairy tale, not this time. Nothing but a hole.

The slide went down, dead smooth, to a kind of great white basin, at the bottom of which was a hole—the mouth of a deep pit—and out of this pit came horrible noises. People were giggling, and snickering; snoring, grunting, whining; always wanting to get out. My friend shouted: 'Help me!' Last words he ever uttered, because he went spinning in a spiral to the black pit . . . and I was spinning down after him.

I caught the edge of this pit, but something was sucking me down. . . . There was a feeling of rushing water; a whirlpool; a vortex!

Then, thank God, I woke up in a cold sweat!

What do you make of that, Penumbra? . . .

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. . . 'Take some kind of pills,' said Penumbra. See an analyst. . . . Seven hundred different pleasures, already! Give me a cheque, and I'll fix that other business; you! . . . Dreams!'

'Wait a minute,' said 'Boy' Bottomley, because the servant was coming in with a telephone which he carried like some hallowed thing.

'Beg pardon, sir. Mr Fryburg on the line, sir. He says it's most urgent, Mr Bottomley, sir.'

'Plug him in!' cried Bottomley. 'Excuse me one minute, will you, Penumbra?'

Flipping open and snapping shut his watch, Mr Penumbra grumbled: 'Keep it crisp and make it snappy, will you, please?'

Bottomley shouted into the telephone: 'Hi! Fryburg! Good old Bugs! Long time no see. What's with you? . . . Eh? . . . Say that again, will you, Bugs? . . . Six foot six? I don't believe it! . . . You swear? . . . Yes, you bet your life I'll be there! Nice to hear your voice again, Bugs. Ten o'clock at the Abracadabra--all right? All right. Okay, Bugs. 'Bye.'

Hanging up the instrument he turned to Mr Penumbra, smiling. 'That was Bugs Fryburg,' he said. 'He's got a girl from Finland six foot six tall and perfectly proportioned! Can you imagine that?'

'No,' said Mr Penumbra.

'I never saw a really well-proportioned girl over five foot seven. Come to the Abracadabra ten o'clock?'

'Maybe. Let me have that cheque.'

Putting it in his wallet, Penumbra said: 'I'll fix *this* affair, don't worry. But better see an analyst, or somebody, Boy.'

'Who, me? I'm okay. . . . Six foot six! Wow! I'll be seeing you, Penumbra.' Bottomley said to the servant: 'No

more calls. Going back to bed to rest a bit. Man must conserve his energy.'

'Quite, sir; just so, sir.'

'Scram, then,' said Bottomley, finishing the second bottle.

'Thank you, sir.'

'Boy' Bottomley slept again for three or four hours, and awoke refreshed, excited, full of anticipation. He had a second breakfast of champagne, and said to his servant: 'Call the Club Papagayo, and tell Giacomo I'll be around at nine o'clock. Say I'll want some fresh caviare and a planked steak rare. And it had better be good.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'And lay out my clothes.'

'Yes, sir.'

'There's some money in my pockets. Don't steal more than a twenty.'

'Thank you, sir.'

He bathed again, and dressed with care; scrutinised himself in his immense pier glass, and was pleased with himself. He was, indeed, a formidable figure of a man. His servant had fastened in his buttonhole a fresh orchid, and laid his watch and money on the dresser. Bottomley counted the loose money twice, and looked into his wallet. Nothing was missing. He was relieved, for nothing unnerved him more than parting with hard cash: he would sign a cheque or a bill for any amount, but hated to let go of small notes and silver.

Bottomley was the most parsimonious tipper in the city. Accordingly they overcharged him preposterously on his bills; but he never minded that — money's worth was a scribbled signature on a slip of paper, or even a wave of the hand and a promise. He had inherited about fifty million dollars. Yet something, some race-memory per-

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haps, compelled him to collect pennies and nickels and dimes in a milk bottle, which he jealously guarded. Of paper, he could not grasp the significance.

Bottomley went to the Club Papagayo, where he was most discreetly and swiftly served. But he cried: 'What's this? Who said caviare?'

'It was ordered, sir, by telephone, sir - that, and rare steak, planked.'

'I'll eat it. But——'

'Yes, sir.'

'A bottle of Burgundy out of this world. Let it breathe while I eat the caviare.'

'Sir. With the caviare, Vodka *Mavrogorgato*?'

'Okay. Also, send some aspirins; something's going round in my head . . . like a corkscrew, round and round . . . and a sound of water . . .'

'After the steak, sir, everything will be good.'

'Ought to see about the plumbing here.'

'Next week, sir . . .'

Bottomley ate, and enjoyed, his caviare and his planked steak, and his bottle of wine; also, coffee, and several bubbles of brandy; signed the exaggerated bill with a flourish, and left fifty cents for the waiter. 'There *must* be something wrong with the plumbing,' he said, as he left, giving the hat-check girl a nickel. 'I hear water going round and round in my head.'

'Better see a plumber,' said the hat-check girl.

'Boy' Bottomley laughed, and tossed her a ten-dollar bill, saying: 'Nice crack!'

Then he was on his way to the Abracadabra Club, where Bugs Fryburg was waiting for him, with a large party of ladies and gentlemen, including several columnists. The Finnish giantess was there. 'Boy' Bottomley's experience of women was wide and deep, but he had never seen such

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an astounding creature as this 'Jan', as Fryburg called her. Six foot six was an understatement: in high-heeled shoes, and with her red hair piled high, Jan stood at least seven feet high.

It seemed to 'Boy' Bottomley—he could not keep his head from spinning—that Jan was all that fancy might ever have painted a woman. Her magnificent figure was tightly enclosed in a black evening dress with long sleeves. There was an air of austerity about her: she wore no jewellery but a heavy gold bracelet with an identity tag. There was something about Jan that made 'Boy' Bottomley's heart beat high. He ordered vintage champagne in double magnums, Jeroboams. The management, somehow, found him that colossal bottle called a Nebuchadnezzar.

He plied Jan with drink, and tried to make her talk . . . 'You come from Finland? . . . I've never been to Finland . . . What do you *do* in Finland?'

After consideration, Jan said: 'Ve cut down trees.'

'Yes, but I mean—what do you do to get a *kick* out of life?'

Jan said: 'De mans vot cut trees, zey vear boots wiz spikes. Ja, ven dey get mad, sure dey kick . . . Ah, *Suomi!*'

'What are you going to do here, Jan?'

'I tink I sing,' said Jan. 'I haff vot you call basso-con-tralto. I haff a deep-down voice. So?'

The veins were standing out in Bottomley's forehead as he said: 'I'll finance you a show on Broadway!'

Bugs Fryburg said: 'Don't listen to him, Jan. You can never believe a word "Boy" Bottomley says. Did I ever tell you the time he messed up my honeymoon? Just as my wife and I got to Majorca, comes, air-mail, a tear-sheet from the *New York Times* with a headline saying my old

man had thrown himself out of a twentieth-storey window, and I was broke; and furthermore there was a warrant out against me for bigamy! Must have cost the "Boy" plenty, but he never was one to begrudge a few thousand dollars for a good laugh — though he never tipped a waiter more than four bits. Loused up my honeymoon,' said Bugs Fryburg, laughing. 'But it was all in fun, eh, Boy?'

'Boy' Bottomley said, perfunctorily: 'I was only kidding, Bugs,' but he could not stop looking at Jan. As he looked, it seemed that he was struck by a tremendous thought. He cried: '— Now, listen! Listen, Jan — I want you to marry me. We'd be the tallest married couple in the world. A wedding in white, get me? And I'll get twelve two-foot midgets to hold your train.' He drank more wine, and went on: 'We'll ride in a gold-plated Rolls-Royce — the biggest in the world. I've been married six times, and, you understand, Jan, I *know*! What do you say?'

Jan, in her deep, husky voice, said: 'I am afraid it is out of the question. I am married.'

'Boy' Bottomley shouted: 'Go to Reno, then!'

'No,' said Jan.

'I'll fix it — Penumbra will fix it!'

'No. Impossible.'

'Boy' Bottomley asked: 'Why impossible? I can give you everything. Why impossible?'

Then something remarkable happened. Jan stood up and said in a thunderous voice: 'Because I have a wife and three children——' and, taking off the high-piled wig of red hair, uncovering a black crew-cut, he lit a cigar, kicked off his high-heeled shoes, threw down his artificial bosom, and, pausing only to say to Fryburg: '— I'll thank you for that cheque at noon——' went plumping out, while the assembled company yelled with laughter.

Bugs Fryburg said: 'I owed you that one, Boy. No?'

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'Boy' Bottomley, seeing that the newspapermen had disappeared, and that the company was in a universal convulsion of mirth, forced himself to laugh and say: 'Anything for a laugh.'

Then, pointing to the Nebuchadnezzar of champagne, he said gravely: 'Good fun, Bugs. Got a sort of spinning in my head. Like one of those humming tops we had when we were kids . . . There was a gyroscope I used to have; it balanced on a string . . . only — ah, *there* you are, Penumbra! — only, I don't know, it stops spinning, and there's a hole in time. Excuse me, I've got to put my head in cold water . . . You know, Bugs, that *wasn't* a nice trick.'

He went heavily downstairs.

They waited for him half an hour, when Penumbra, petulantly fiddling with his watch, went down to find him.

He found 'Boy' Bottomley, kneeling on the floor, gripping the edge of the wash-basin with his great white hands and staring at the plug-hole, into which was descending, in gurgling spirals, a stream of cold water.

He was dead, with the Fear of the Outer Dark in his eyes.

Mr Penumbra clicked his tongue, made certain notes in a little book, and went away.

Collector's Piece

Karmesin's moustache has always fascinated me. It is full of zoological interest; it appears to live a life of its own. When I first met him twenty-five years ago, it resembled a hibernating squirrel. Ten years later, it had turned into a dying racoon. And now it was a grey-backed gull seeking refuge from a storm under the jutting crag of his formidable nose, so that as his cigarette burned down low I half expected it to fly away with a terrified squawk. But he rescued it in the nick of time, dropped the glowing stub into the dregs of his coffee cup, and gave it a reassuring pat.

He caught my glance – Karmesin missed nothing – and said: 'Yes, old boy, it has gone white. It grew out white after I shaved it off in 1923.'

'For a disguise?' I asked.

'Well, to lay the foundation for one. Ah, that was an affair! The world has never seen the like of it, and never will again!'

Now Karmesin is an enigma. In all the years I have known him, I have never been able to decide whether he is the greatest criminal or the greatest liar the world has ever known. Either way, he is great. He has his facts at his fingertips – the unlikeliest facts. He never contradicts himself, and when he falls into a reminiscent mood he casts such a spell upon you by a kind of sleight-of-mind that, while he talks, you must believe . . . He is the conjurer and you the child at the party when, in the dimmed light,

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the bowl of goldfish comes out of the hat. And you go away saying to yourself: *'It must be a lie. . . . Or was it?'*

'Tell me about it,' I said.

With heavy sarcasm, he said: 'There is no earthly use telling you anything, you. You never believe me. You are one of those fools that call themselves "sceptics" and "hard-headed", etcetera, etcetera. And what fools you turn out to be in your misbelief! You will believe in Signor Ponzi's gold, or Ivar Kreugar's mad promises, far more sincerely than you believe in God. That is why the easiest money I have ever made has been by picking out the shrewdest sceptic I could find.'

'Oh, Karmesin!' I begged.

'I will tell you briefly,' said Karmesin with a chuckle, 'just in order to shock you. . . .'

Oh, if I could convey to you that sonorous, steady, insistent, hypnotic voice of Karmesin's when he began to talk, gazing straight in front of him! And his eyes. You have seen one of those ancient portraits in which the subject, looking at nothing, appears from every angle to be watching you? Such were the eyes of Karmesin, as he told his story. . . .

I am that rare combination, a thinker and a man of action (Karmesin began). Therefore, it has been possible for me, in the course of a long life devoted almost exclusively to robbery in most of its forms, to conceive and execute some of the most sensational coups in the history of crime. But what I am going to tell you constitutes the history of, perhaps, the most audacious and spectacular robbery of all time.

It also involves a discovery which, if published, would shake the world. It would drive news of a world catastrophe on to Page Three. And as for the loot, well, the

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man who had that in his pocket – if he had come by it honestly – could command anything. Magnates would cry for it; nations would bid for it; treasuries would be ransacked for the purchase of it – if it had been honestly come by. Even now, hundreds of thousands would be paid for the return of it, if only one knew where to find it. And believe me, it is hard to find, because it is nothing but a tattered scrap of half-rotten vellum that you could cover with one hand, scribbled with seventy-five broken words on one side, and some crabbed dog-Latin on the other. I was paid two million dollars for stealing it.

You want to know who paid me two million dollars, and for exactly what? Aha, my boy, here we come to the privileged classes, the higher ups! I may not mention real names for fear that you might repeat them to your own destruction – for I, most certainly, on inquiry would deny all knowledge of this affair.

There are, as you must know, dynasties of dollars: Hamburger II, Limburger IV, Van Elbow VI, and so on. All right, my pay came from a hereditary magnate of the third generation whom I will call Mr Three.

His grandfather was a species of Dr Moriarty of high finance . . . a sort of arachnid in a tenuous web. He begot a son, who was the worst of the lot, and so the fortune descended to Mr Three. Now there – God save the Queen! – there was a strange one. Although he had been brought up to great expectations, he had been grudgingly shoved through college until, having acquired a master's degree in the arts, he became a teacher. Brother, I have studied under hard masters, but the Lord preserve me from such a one as Three must have been! I have some little experience of him. He was a spy, a watcher-by-night, a pedant of the most learned sort. There was no way of having Mr Three.

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I was introduced to him by a man named Sweetbread, and this man was, in his way, one of the most sinister characters I have ever encountered. He was an agent for Mr Three.

But before I go on: another word about Mr Three. He had a hundred million dollars, but lived at the rate of about twelve dollars a week in a brownstone house that might have been magnificent if he had kept it clean.

He did not smoke: for him tobacco was dust and ashes, catarrh and halitosis, and so many dollars chucked into the ashtrays. He informed me, with some severity, that the stump of a Corona-Corona which, in a moment of impatience, I discarded in his presence, was in point of fact worth five dollars and seven cents, if I counted taxes.

Alcohol he abhorred, clothes he regarded as vanity; he went about shabby as only a multi-millionaire dare afford to be. As for women: Mr Three was afraid of them.

Mr Three, born a millionaire and a miser, became a collector. It is the same thing, in effect. As a numismatist collects gold coins because they are old or *recherché*, so any other kind of collector, turning specie into the worth of it, gathers and grasps – whether it be metal or stone, or (which is a most valuable) paper in the form of books, etchings, stamps and whatnot.

In point of fact, these wretches of collectors are worse than penurious. Your common or garden miser grabs hard cash, and holds it until God strikes him dead. He deals only in dirty money. But your collector of the fine arts makes blind alleys into which run the works of great men. I could always rob such types with an easy conscience.

However, much as I hated and despised Mr Three for his vile greed, I detested Sweetbread even more. He was an M.A., an Oxford man; something of a lecturer; a bit of a critic; an eccentric. Oh, what a repulsive man he was,

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with his greenish fish-belly face, and his horrid, fruity, liver-coloured mouth that was never quite wet or dry, and made a tiny, sticky, smacking sound every time it opened!

Yet a scholar, mark you, a man of erudition!

Tortuous in his ways, serpentine in his means, armed with one of the best brains in England, Sweetbread went in pursuit of that which was out of the way. His was a clammy passion, a grave-robber's love for what lay buried; a desire to disturb that which was supposed to be at rest.

Now one evening, he came to me and said: 'Mr Karmesin, would you be interested in a million dollars or so?'

'Perhaps,' I said.

'I have a billionaire,' said Sweetbread, 'ripe for a bite.'
'Oh?'

'It is legitimate,' Sweetbread said, using sporting jargon, which came unpleasantly out of his mouth. 'Play or pay. Deliver or nothing. You understand? Only out of the grand total, I must have one-quarter, which might run as high as half a million dollars.'

'Aie, aie, aie!' I said. 'Here, in effect, is a bite!'

'Indeed,' said Sweetbread. 'The bite of bites! Better meet my principal.'

And so I did.

Mr Three said to Sweetbread: 'You have, no doubt, explained the matter to this gentleman?'

'No, Mr Three, I have not,' said Sweetbread. 'Not without your permission. It is a delicate matter, I think.'

'Then I will thank you kindly to explain,' said Mr Three. At this point, Sweetbread became academic. He gave me an interesting mixture of fact and conjecture, the gist of which was as follows:

The poet, Edmund Spenser, died in 1599 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. Now as far as I am con-

cerned, the author of *The Faerie Queene* is one of the most ponderous and prodigious bores in Elizabethan literature. Yet he earned the affection of his Queen, and therefore received certain outward signs of respect from his betters. So, when Edmund Spenser died, there was a show of grief.

When he was buried, the greatest of his contemporaries wrote poems to throw into his grave. And, when I give you their names, you will observe that in the grave of Edmund Spenser were buried manuscripts more precious than the Codex Sinaiticus.

There were present Michael Drayton, Thomas Nashe, John Donne, Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare. Every one of these great Elizabethans cast into Spenser's grave a poem specially written for the occasion of his burial.

William Shakespeare was thirty-five years old at the time, and engaged upon a pot-boiler entitled *Much Ado About Nothing*. He was in the middle of it when Edmund Spenser had to come home from Ireland and die!

Sweetbread said that, according to his conjecture, it was Michael Drayton—a gentle, sentimental little busybody of a minor poet—who went bursting about London, collaring the greatest literary figures of the time and, with womanish persistence, nagging and worrying them away from their business until they wrote mourning verses to be dropped with a decent show of grief into old Edmund Spenser's coffin.

That the poets I have mentioned finally did so, is historical fact. I fancy that the eager beaver, Michael Drayton, got at Ben Jonson first, in the Mermaid Tavern, and, having mellowed him with a double-quart of sherry, talked him into promising to write a few lines in honour of the author of *The Faerie Queene*.

Then, in the time-honoured manner of such well-mean-

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ing but persistent pests, he went to Shakespeare and said, in effect: 'I hope I am not disturbing you, Will, but Ben has pledged his word to write a bit of an ode for poor Edmund. I am turning out a little sonnet myself, in my own poor way. How about you?'

Whereupon, William Shakespeare, unwilling to offend Drayton and Jonson, two tried old friends, pushed aside the tedious manuscript of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and, taking up a scrap of vellum, dashed off what was for him, a very poor sonnet.

Ah, naturally you ask me how Sweetbread knew that it was a scrap of vellum and a sonnet.

Well, Sweetbread did not know. He knew only the bare historical facts. It was I who discovered the details, as I am about to tell you. Briefly: Mr Three made it clear that he would pay two million dollars, and no questions asked, for that original manuscript of William Shakespeare.

Here, if you like, was something of a tall order! I ask you: walk into Westminster Abbey, open one of the famous graves, rummage in it and walk out undetected. Just try it and see!

I said to Mr Three: 'No doubt, if I were prepared to risk my liberty, you would be prepared to chance a little money in advance?'

Upon this, there was a sordid haggling; but in the end (acquainted with my reputation for scrupulous fair-dealing) Mr Three agreed to advance me fifty thousand dollars, and to put down a certified cheque payable on a date which I will call the twenty-third.

It was on this date that I guaranteed to deliver whatever manuscripts I might find in the tomb of Edmund Spenser – especially the Shakespeare manuscript. Thus, upon a precarious understanding, I went to work at one

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of the trickiest jobs in the history of crime, working on a hunch.

Now, exactly why did I pin myself down to this date in particular? I will tell you. Two days before this date, on the twenty-first, workmen were due to enter the Abbey in order to make certain repairs.

Simply, I proposed to join them. And so I did, and thus I carried away, for two million dollars, an original manuscript of William Shakespeare.

But how?

. . . There was a time, my boy, when I used to attend the annual meeting of the Conjurers' Club—myself an amateur—when the leading magicians of the country demonstrated to one another their newest tricks.

One evening, at one of these meetings, a group of five Yorkshiremen dressed as Chinamen walked on and off the stage, putting up an open tent. They went, they came; they came, and they went. This one carried a pole; that one carried a flag; another dragged a carpet; a fourth shouldered a mallet; the fifth stood still in a mandarin's robe and did nothing. They came, they went—never leaving that little stage. But all of a sudden, the little tent being twitched away, there were only four Chinamen. One—two—three—four: categorically four Chinamen only.

They bustled about, picking up pegs, rolling up canvas, fetching and carrying (never leaving the stage) and then, there were two!

Rolled up in the tent, you guess? Not so. The man carrying the canvas let it unroll and fall with a terrible thud. Still, only two Chinamen left out of five, on a bare stage, with no back-drops, mirrors, or other apparatus. Three men spirited away, ha?

This trick I saw through and remembered. It's a very

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old one. Let anyone grow accustomed to your comings and goings, especially if you are carrying something, and you remain unnoticeable. As simple as that! In the magician's trick, one person, the mandarin, stood stock-still. Upon him all eyes were concentrated. His four collaborators came and went, and so, under the keenest eyes in the world, could go without coming again, and still, in the imagination of the audience, remain present.

Hypnosis of stillness? That is well enough in its place. But for general purposes, give me the hypnosis of coming-and-going. A combination of the two is difficult to resist.

So I dyed my moustache red and applied to my forehead a lock of hair such as is called a 'quiff'.

Then I dressed myself in working man's clothes, took hold of a plank, and went with the others into the Abbey; bustled up and down with crowbars and wedges. When in doubt, keep moving as if with a set purpose.

An official looked at me questioningly, once; but, pulling out of my pocket a cold chisel, I shouted: 'All right, all right, all right—I'm coming, Jack'—and so disappeared as two men passed me with a thing like a hospital stretcher loaded with concrete.

As often as possible, I carried bulky objects on my shoulder just in case, in passing, someone chanced to take too keen an interest in my face. I had a bad moment when the foreman accosted me, and said: 'Hoi! Who are you? What the hell have you got there?'

But I am a man who has made a habit of anticipating the Unexpected, and foreseeing the Unforeseen. I had, as a matter of routine, found out the name of the foreman, and the names of his immediate superiors.

'Cement, Mr Edwards,' I said, letting fall the sack. 'Mr Graves sent me. He said you was a man short.'

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He said, with a kind of weary disgust: 'I don't know nothing about that. Oh well, all right. Got your card and pass, I suppose? Well, get cracking, Jumbo, and lend a hand with that mortar. Mix, man, mix! We haven't got all day. . . .'

They had not, indeed – there was little time to go before the gang stopped work for the day. But I was annoyed at being recognised as a stranger. My plan originally had been to pass entirely unnoticed; to hide myself in the shadows when the workmen went out, taking my bits of paper at my leisure; and so, out, with a ladder on my shoulder when they came back next morning.

But now I had swiftly to change my plan. I had to stay conspicuous under the very eyes of the foreman, and yet remain invisible.

As usual, I had an inspiration, one of my little flashes of genius. Now any silly sedentary thriller-writer may perpetrate or detect from an arm-chair, but it takes a man of action with nerves of steel to do what I did then. Slipping into the shadows, I stripped myself of shoes, trousers and shirt, so that I stood in my underclothes. People have sometimes laughed at me for wearing combinations, or a union suit, as it is also called. I can tell you, I was glad of that union suit then. I dipped both hands into a bag of cement which I had placed in readiness, and whitened myself from head to foot.

Then I lay down on the blank surface of a plain tomb, crossed my arms, and kept still. There was only half an hour to go before the whistle blew, but that half-hour was one of the most trying I have ever spent in my life.

My nostrils were full of cement so that I wanted to sneeze, and I itched abominably. Once, I heard the foreman say: 'Where's that big slob got to now? The one Graves sent?'

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One of the workmen said: 'Dunno, gaffer. Thought I see 'im lugging a plank, a little while back.'

So he had; but time is a tricky thing when you are on a job and haven't got a watch.

'I'm fed up with the loafers Graves sends me. . . . All right, knock off now. Go home, and eat your sausages and kippers – that's all you're fit for. Pack up!'

One of the workmen naïvely tried to tell him that *his* wife made him a nice meat pie for his tea . . . and there I lay straining every muscle to hold back a monumental sneeze. Thank heaven the lights were being switched out! – for, as they passed me, two of the workmen stopped to look at me.

One of them said: 'Who's he, Jack? Never noticed that image before.'

'You wouldn't,' said the other with contempt. 'It's some famous poet. Bin dead a thousand years. Where's yer education?'

'It ain't even life-like,' his companion said. 'Sort of in-'uman, ain't it?'

'Kind of gruesome. But, p'r'aps, they looked like that in olden times. . . . Let's get out of 'ere, they're shutting up.'

I do not know whether this was the greatest compliment, or the deadliest insult, I have ever received. It added to my discomfort, however, because in addition to that maddening urge to sneeze, I had a wild impulse to cry, in a sepulchral voice: '*Boo!*' and this impulse gave rise to a terrible desire to laugh.

But they went their ways, and at last I was alone.

The rest was easy, if somewhat ghoulish. The Abbey, as you know, is patrolled by watchmen. Having ascertained the times of their coming and going, I could go to work at my leisure. And so I did, with crowbars and wedges.

I was glad that the remains of poor Edmund Spenser

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were encased in lead, and that the poets had dropped their offerings on top of the casket. Thus, it was not necessary for me to disturb his dust. In the light of my flash-lamp I saw, lying on that leaden surface, some detritus that might once have been paper, but now resembled (let us say) cornflakes. The vellum alone remained, and that only in part. So, I took it; and with all reverence, sealed the tomb. . . .

Oh, but that was a long, cold night I spent hiding in the shadows among the graves! But the night passed, and when the workmen came back I was among them in my labourer's clothes, having washed myself in a pail of water that was used to make mortar. There I was, carrying a shovel.

The foreman shouted at me: 'You lump! You blithering gowk! Where did you get to yesterday evening?'

'I had a stomach ache.'

'Well, take your stomach ache out of here. Take it to Mr Graves, and tell him I don't want you. I'll pick my own gangs, by the Lord——'

And so I got away with that priceless bit of vellum, for which, true to his word, Mr Three paid me two million dollars; of which I duly handed half a million to Sweetbread.

There is the story.

'Well,' said Karmesin, 'you will not believe even such a straightforward story as that now, I suppose?'

I said, in mollifying tones: 'After all, Karmesin, such a story is hard to credit without, say, a bit of documentary evidence.'

He was not perturbed, as I had feared he might be. 'Documentary evidence? But, of course,' he said, pulling out of an inside pocket the biggest wallet I have ever seen. 'Let me see, now . . . let me see. . . .'

Collector's Piece

He took out a piece of stiff paper about six inches by four and, offering it to me, said: 'Here you are. Before I handed over the original, I made a photographic copy. Can you read it?'

I could not decipher more than a word or two. I saw, simply, a couple of detached rags of an old manuscript, but I could read the signature — *William Shakspere*.

'May I have a copy of this?' I asked.

'No, you may not,' said Karmesin. 'But, if you like, I will rewrite you these lines, as Sweetbread transcribed them in modern spelling.'

He took pencil and paper, and here is what I, in my turn, pass on:

. . . nd Spenser

*Would that with these poor words I seal'd my grief
In this cold grave, old friend. Yet mourn I must
For memory runs more slower than the thief
That men call Death, and when these bones are dust
Since grief like noble wine grows strong and sweet
With Time in shadow, so my mourning will.*

(Lines missing here.)

*God grant that you sleep deep while we who wake
And born to be forgot await our Night.*

William Shakspere.

'Shakespeare did better,' said Karmesin, putting back the wallet. 'But remember, at that time, he was harassed with show business, and the script of *Much Ado About Nothing*.'

'But,' I said, 'since the existence of these manuscripts in Spenser's tomb was known, why hasn't the government investigated?'

Karmesin said: 'It has. Acting on irrefutable evidence,

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the grave of Edmund Spenser was officially opened in 1938. Consult your authorities, if you don't believe me. They opened the grave, and found nothing. I had been there first, you see.'

'But the manuscript, the manuscript!' I cried.

Karmesin said: 'Ah, that. Pity. Mr Three married a frugal housewife in 1929; someone after his own heart, more or less. He died not long after. I rather think that a sympathetic collector of unconsidered trifles got hold of the Shakespeare manuscript. I know for a fact that a dealer named Newgate paid an absurd price—ten times collector's value—for a first edition of *Tom Jones*, "With Miscellaneous Papers, Etcetera", and, in the spring of 1931, bought a yacht.'

'It all seems so incredible,' I said.

'I am tired of your "incredibles"'. Why, only the other day a few Scottish amateurs walked into Westminster Abbey, and trotted out with the sacred Stone of Scone, upon which the throne of England stands. Their trick was the same as mine, old as the hills. Child's play. I should not have troubled to mention my little affair, except that I know you to be interested in literary curiosities. Thanks for the lunch. *Au revoir*.'

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The generosity of the criminal generally consists in the giving away of something that never was, or no longer is, his own property. A case in point is that of the robber and murderer, Rurik Duncan, whose brief career was bloody, fierce and pitiless, but whose last empty gesture was thick and sticky with sentiment which uplifted the heart of a nation. Duncan gave away his eyes to be delivered after his death. It was regarded as a vital act of charity – in effect, a ticket to Salvation – that this singularly heartless fellow gave permission for his eyes to be grafted on to some person or persons unknown.

Similar cases have been printed in the newspapers. As it is with most philanthropists who give their all, so it was with this man Duncan. Having no further need for what he donated, he made a virtue of relinquishing it – stealing from his own grave; cunning to the bitter end. I knew a billionaire whose ears were stopped during his lifetime against any plea for charity, but who, when his claws relaxed in death, gave what he had to orphans. I knew a Snow Maiden of an actress whose body is bequeathed to Science – whatever that may be. Rurik will rank with these, no doubt, on the Everlasting Plane. And why not? All the billionaire had that he was proud of was certain sums of money and holdings in perpetuity, which he let go because he had to. All the actress had was something of merely anatomical interest. Rurik had his eyes. He prized these eyes, which were of a strange, flecked, yellowish

colour. He could expand or contract them at will, and seemed to look in a different direction while he was watching your every movement.

Before we proceed with this old story, I had better make some kind of resumé of Rurik's career. He was born between the rocks and the desert, and was what, in my day, was called a 'nuisance', but what is now termed a 'juvenile delinquent'. In my day, physical force used to be applied to such; whereafter they generally lived to die in their beds; now, they bring in psychologists, and quite right too, because you can never tell where anything begins or ends. It is only in extreme cases that a Rurik, nowadays, is stopped in his career with a tingling jolt and – first and last restraint – the pressure of certain heavy leather straps.

In brief: Rurik killed chickens, maimed sheep, corrupted and led a mob of fourteen-year-old muggers; graduated to the rackets in which he was employed to his pleasure and profit in nineteen States of the Union; got hot, gathered about him two coadjutors and became one of the most formidable operators since Dillinger. He had extraordinary luck, and a really remarkable sense of timing – without which no bank robber can hope to succeed. Also, he had a highly developed administrative capacity, a strategic knack coupled with what one of the reporters called 'tactical know-how'. He could time a getaway to that split second in which a traffic light winks, letting a town throw up its own road-block. Rurik went plundering from bank to bank. It has been argued that, with such superb dissimulation and timing, he might have been a great actor or, perhaps, a great boxer. He might have been a copper baron, or oil king, or a banker, if only he had been born in the right place and at the right time; or literate, an ink-slinger. But he wasn't. He was born on

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an eroded farm, and went with a certain brilliance to his convulsive end.

Oddly enough, Rurik was not given to vindictiveness or hate, in the generally accepted sense of these terms. Something was missing from him that makes society possible. Call it a soul, call it a heart, call it pity; but say that he wanted to be alone. And so he was, right to the end, with a high-backed chair all to himself, and a secret which he thought he would carry on his own, locked within himself, to a narrow place where nobody could touch him.

This secret was, the whereabouts of certain buried treasure; I mean, the location of \$2,600,000 which he had stolen and hidden nobody knew where.

It was Rurik who stole the armoured truck in Butte, Montana. At any moment, now, the pulp-writers will rehash the Rurik Snatch as a 'Perfect Crime'. The details are available in the files of all the newspapers in the world. It is sufficient to say, here, simply that Rurik and his two companions, later to be known as 'The Unholy Three', exquisitely timing and balancing the operation, got away with an immense pay-roll, together with nearly all the money that had been in the vault of a great bank, one day, and seemed to evaporate, truck and all. *Timing, timing, timing*, said the Sunday supplement criminologists; until one became sick and tired of the word. There was also some reference to Mr H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, whose cloak of invisibility was the fact that he was too familiar, at a given hour, to appear conspicuously out of place.

Both schools of thought were right: the timers and the psychologists. At one moment there was an armoured truck loaded with money. Next moment there were three or four bewildered men, loosely holding pistols they did not know what to point at; three streets full of traffic had

stopped for the lights, and a great fortune was on its way to nowhere. Only one shot was fired, and that by a bank guard named Larkin, a retired police officer who, when the three bandits appeared, one of them with a gun in his hand, let fly with a short-barrelled .38. As it later transpired, Larkin hit Rurik in the hip and so precipitated his capture. When the money is recovered, it is believed, Larkin will have good legal grounds for claiming a reasonable portion of the reward. The robbers, by arrangement, carried unloaded automatics—it seems that Rurik was very particular about this. So, in about as long as it takes a man to say: ‘Was that a back-fire?’—one of the greatest robberies of our time was perpetrated, and there was great Federal perplexity. Anywhere in the world a man can disappear, as Willie Sutton did, simply by being patient and keeping still. In Montana, even an armoured truck can disappear. But how do two and a half million odd dollars disappear?

They found the truck a certain distance out of town, empty. Where then was the paper money and the silver? Any moving-man will tell you that there is nothing heavier than paper; and any bank messenger will tell you that there is nothing more unwieldy than a bag of loose coin. He would be a very strong man indeed who could carry on his back even a quarter of a million dollars in small bills for the distance of fifteen city blocks. Throw in a bag or two of silver dollars to joggle the equilibrium, and put soft sand underfoot instead of paving stones, and no man can do it. A mule couldn’t. And here not two hundred and fifty thousand, but two and a half million dollars had been spirited away to some hiding place in the rocks!

Reconstructing the affair, the Federal authorities arrived at the conclusion that Rurik and his men stopped the truck somewhere on the outskirts of Butte, and hid the

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money in some place tantalisingly close to town, known only to themselves. Each took \$8,000 for current expenses. The truck was driven about fifteen miles farther, to a point near where Rurik had hidden a getaway car. Rurik took this car, and then they separated, arranging to meet when it was expedient to do so. But this is what happened:—Little Dominic, trying to buy a used car in Helena, was recognised, and died fighting it out with the State Troopers. MacGinnis lost his way northwards among the rocks and died there, in his pig-headed way, rather than give himself up. Only Rurik was taken alive, having fainted through loss of blood in a filling-station.

It is worthy of note that, before he lost consciousness, his last words were: 'Even maps you can't trust,' and afterwards raved of the illusion of Space and the fallacy of Distance, until they brought him to. The State pumped into Rurik the solid blood and the plasma of I forget how many honest men before he was brought to trial, and convicted of the bank robbery. Here the F B I furnished the additional information that, under another name, Rurik was wanted in the State of New York for murder. So he was shipped back to New York, neatly patched up, and there after fair trial found guilty and sentenced to death by electrocution. He took the sentence impassively, his only comment being: 'A short life and a merry one——' though, since most of his short life had been spent hiding or running away, I find it difficult to concur with his opinion of merriment.

Now, while Rurik was playing pinochle in the death-house, there came to him a certain Father Jellusik who said that Dr Holliday, the eye surgeon, wanted Rurik's eyes. The condemned man, laughing heartily, said: 'Listen, Father, the D.A. offers me my *life* if I sing where the dough is stashed! And now somebody wants my eyes.

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No disrespect, Father, but don't make me laugh. D'you think I never heard how you can see things in a dead man's eye?'

Father Jellusik said: 'My son, that's an old wives' tale. I have it on reliable authority that a dead man's eye is no more revealing than an unloaded camera.'

Rurik began: 'Once I looked into . . . well, anyway, I never saw nothing. What do they want my eyes for?'

'An eye,' said Father Jellusik, 'is nothing but a certain arrangement of body tissue. Put it like this: you are *you*, Rurik. If one of your fingers were chopped off, would you still be Rurik?'

'Who else?'

'Without your arms and legs, who would you be?'

'Rurik.'

'Now say you had an expensive miniature camera, and were making your will. Wouldn't you give it away?'

'To the cops, no.'

'But to an innocent child?'

'I guess I might.'

'And the eye, you know, is nothing but a camera.'

In the end Rurik signed a document bequeathing his eyes to Dr Holliday for the benefit of this remarkable surgeon's child patients, many of whom had been born blind. 'You can't take 'em with you,' Rurik is alleged to have said; thereby letting loose a tidal wave of emotion. One would have thought that Rurik was the first person ever to utter this proposition. The sob sisters took him to their bosoms, and put into his mouth all kinds of scrap-book philosophy, such as: 'If more folks thought more about more folks, the world——' etcetera, etcetera. His last words, which were: 'Hold it, I changed my mind,' were reported as: 'I feel kind of at peace now.' The general public completely ignored the fact that there was a little

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matter of two and a half million dollars which Rurik had, to all practical intents and purposes, taken with him.

The few that thought of the matter said: 'They'll track that money down. It's got to be somewhere, and they'll trace it. The F B I will throw out a Net.' But in point of fact, Little Dominic and MacGinnis being dead, no one had a clue to its whereabouts. It was buried treasure.

For years previous to the execution of Rurik Duncan, Dr Holliday had been performing fabulous feats of eye surgery. To him, the grafting of corneal tissue from the eye of a man recently dead to the eye of a living child was a routine affair which he regarded much as a tailor regards the stitching of a collar—good sewing was essential, as a matter of course, but the thing had to fit. And, somewhat like certain fierce tailors of the old school, he was at once savagely possessive, devilishly proud, and bitterly contemptuous of the craft to which he was married. I know an old tailor who never tired of sneering at himself, who would have nothing to do with his fellow craftsmen because they were, in his opinion, mere tailors; but who ordered King Edward VII to get out of his shop and stay out, because His Majesty questioned the hang of a sleeve. Dr Holliday was a man of this character—dissatisfied, arbitrary, unsatisfying, ill-natured, impossible to please. He had something like a contemptuous familiarity with the marvellous mechanism of the human eye, but would allow nobody but himself to talk lightly of it. He became famous when he grafted his first cornea. When the reporters came to interview him, he appeared to be angry with the world for admiring him.

Irritable, disdainful, his face set in a look of intense distaste, and talking in an over-emphasised reedy voice, he

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could make the most casual remark offensive. Reminded of his services to humanity, Dr Holliday said: 'Human eyes, sheep's eyes — they are all one to me. As eyes, a fly's eyes are far more remarkable. Your eye is nothing but a make-shift arrangement for receiving light rays upon a sensitive surface. A camera with an automatic shutter, and damned inefficient at that. They do better in the factories. I have repaired a camera. Well?'

A reporter said: 'But you've restored sight, Dr Holliday. A camera can't *see* without an eye behind it.'

Dr Holliday snapped: 'Neither can an eye see, as anybody but an absolute *fool* must know.'

'Well, you can't see without your eyes,' another reporter said.

'You can't see with them,' said Dr Holliday. 'Even if I had the time to explain to you the difference between looking and seeing, you have not the power to understand me; and even if you had, how would you convey what you understood to the louts who buy your journal? Let it be sufficient for me to say, therefore, that the grafting of a cornea, to one who knows how to do it, is probably less difficult than an invisible darning job done to hide a cigarette burn in your trousers. Vision comes from *behind* the eye.'

One of the reporters who wrote up things like viruses and astronomy for the Sunday supplement said: 'Optic nerve——' at which Dr Holliday stooped at him like a sparrow hawk.

'— What do you know about the optic nerve, if I may ask? Oh, I love these popular scientists, I love them! Optic nerve. That's all there is to it, isn't it? A wiring job, so to speak, eh? Plug it in, switch it on, turn a knob — is that the idea? Splice it, like a rope, eh? My dear sir, you know nothing about the tiniest and most insignificant nerve in

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your body, let alone how it is motivated – and neither do I, and neither does anybody else. But you will suck on your scientific jargon, just as a weaning baby sucks on an unhygienic rubber pacifier. It is an impertinence, sir, to talk so glibly to me! “Optic nerve” – as if I were a chorus girl! Can you name me thirty parts, say, of the mere eye – just name them – that you talk with such facility of optic nerves? Have you considered the extraordinary complexity of the optic nerve? The microscopic complications of cellular tissues and blood vessels?’

The reporter, abashed, said: ‘I’m sorry, Dr Holliday. I was only going to ask if it might be possible – I don’t mean in our time, but some time – really to graft a whole eye and, as you put it, splice an optic nerve.’

In his disagreeable way, unconsciously mocking the hesitancy of the reporter’s voice – this was another of his unpleasant mannerisms – Dr Holliday said: ‘Yes, sir, and no, sir. One thing is impossible and that is, to predict what may or may not be surgically possible or impossible in our time. But I can tell you this, sir, as expert to expert: it is about as possible to graft a whole eye as it might be to graft a whole head. As every schoolboy must know, nervous tissue does not regenerate itself in the vertebrate – except in the case of the salamander in whom the regenerative process remains a mystery.’

A lady reporter asked: ‘Aren’t salamanders those lizards that are supposed to live in fire, or something?’

Dr Holliday started to snap but, meeting the wide gaze of this young woman, liked her irises and, gently for him, explained: ‘The salamander resembles a lizard but it is an amphibian, with a long tail. An amphibian lives both in and out of water. Have you never seen a salamander? I’ll show you one . . .’ And he led the way to an air-conditioned room that smelled somewhat of dead vegetation,

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through which ran a miniature river bordered with mud. In this mud languid little animals stirred.

A man from the south said: 'Heck, they're mud-eels!'

At him Dr Holliday curled a lip, saying: 'Same thing.'

The Sunday supplement man said: 'Dr Holliday, may I ask whether you are studying the metabolic processes of the salamander with a view to their application——

'—No, you may not.'

The lady reporter said: 'I think they're cute. Where can I get one?'

Majestically, Dr Holliday called to an assistant: 'Everington, put a couple of salamanders in a jar for the lady! . . .'

Next day there were photographs of a salamander in the papers, and headlines like this:

HEAD GRAFT NEXT?

Mystery of Salamander

After that, Dr Holliday would not speak to anybody connected with the press, and was dragged into the lime-light again only when he grafted the right eye of Rurik into the head of a four-year-old boy named Dicky Aldous, son of Richard Aldous, a wealthy paint manufacturer of Greenwich, Connecticut.

It was not one operation, but eight, over a period of about six weeks, during which time the child's eye was kept half-in and half-out of a certain fluid which Dr Holliday has refused to discuss. The Sunday supplement writer, the 'sensationalist', has hinted that this stuff is derived from the lizard-like amphibian salamander which, alone among vertebrates, has the power to regenerate nervous tissue. It is not for me to express an opinion in this

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matter. Only I will insist that sensationalists all too often are right.

Jules Verne was a sensationalist; and now we are discussing man-powered rockets to the moon. H. G. Wells was a sensationalist; but there really are such things as heavier-than-air aircraft, automatic sights and atomic bombs. I, for one, refuse to discount the surmises of the Sunday supplement man who put it as a conjecture that Dr Holliday was using, as a regenerative principle, some hormone extracted from the humble salamander. Why not? Alexander Fleming found penicillin in the mould on lemon rind. Believe me, if it were not for such cranks, medicine would still be witch-doctoring, and brain surgery a hole in the head to let the devils out.

Anyway, Dr Holliday grafted Rurik Duncan's right eye into the head of the four-year-old Dicky Aldous. It is not true that the father, Richard Aldous, paid Dr Holliday a hundred thousand dollars for the operation: Mr Aldous donated this sum, and more, to the Holliday Foundation of which every schoolboy has heard.

To state the facts baldly: when the bandages were lifted, Dicky Aldous, born blind, could see out of his new right eye. The left remained sightless; but with the right the child could clearly discriminate objects. The lady reporter made quite a piece of his first recognition of the colour blue.

The Sunday supplement man, in whose bosom still rankled Dr Holliday's rudeness, wrote an article suggesting that the delicate tissues of the human eye might be seriously altered by the tremendous shock of electrocution which, since it involves the entire nervous system, necessarily affects the optic nerve.

Dr Holliday, after a few outbursts, became silent. It was noted that he was frequently found to be in consulta-

tion with the English brain specialist, Mr Donne, and Dr Felsen, the neurologist. Paragraph by paragraph the case of Dicky Aldous dropped out of the papers.

It was simply taken for granted that it was possible to graft a living eye. Other matters came up to occupy our attention – Russia, the Hydrogen bomb, Israel, the World Series – and the fly-trap of the public mind closed upon and digested what once it had gapingly received as 'The Dicky Aldous Miracle'.

But this is far from being the end of the story. As an old friend of Richard Aldous and his family I was privileged to witness subsequent events. And since, now, it can do no harm and might do some good, I feel that I have the right to offer the public a brief account of these events.

Richard Aldous was a third-generation millionaire; genteel, sensitive, a collector of engravings. His wife, whom he had met in Lucca, was an Italian princess – finely engraved herself, and almost fanatically fastidious. Tourists used to wonder how it was possible for a sensitive, high-bred Italian aristocrat to live in a *palazzo* surrounded with filth. Actually, there is nothing to wonder at – the explanation is in the Three Wise Monkeys, procurable at any novelty store. See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil – and there you are, divorced from humanity. In extreme cases stop your nose, having previously sprinkled yourself with strong perfume.

As you can imagine, therefore, little Dicky Aldous in his fifth year was a child who was being brought up by his mother in complete ignorance of the ugliness that exists in the world. The servants in the Aldous house had been selected rather than simply employed – examined, as it were, through a magnifying glass – generally imported

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from Europe, expense being no object. Dicky's nurse was a sweet-natured English gentlewoman. From her he could have heard nothing but old-fashioned nursery songs – sung off-key, perhaps, but kindly and innocuous – and no story more dangerous than the one about the pig that wouldn't jump over the stile. The housekeeper was from Lucca; she had followed her mistress six years previously, with her husband, the butler. Neither of them could speak more than two or three phrases in English. Mrs Aldous's maid, Beatrice, also was an Italian girl; a wonderful needlewoman and hairdresser, but totally ignorant of the English language. Indeed, she seldom spoke any language at all – she preferred to sing, which the little boy liked, being blind.

Here were no evil communications to corrupt the good manners of poor Dicky Aldous.

Yet one day, about a month after the sensational success of Dr Holliday's operation had been fully established, the English nurse came down from the nursery to make the required announcement that Master Dicky was asleep, and there was something in her manner which made the father ask: 'Anything wrong, Miss Williams?'

Rachel Williams, the English nanny, didn't like to say, but at last she burst out – that somebody must have been teaching little Dicky to use bad language. She could not imagine who might be responsible. Closely pressed, she spelled out a word or two – she could not defile her tongue by uttering them whole – and Aldous began to laugh. 'Tell me now, Miss Williams, what is the name of Mrs Aldous's maid?'

'Beatrice,' said Miss Williams, pronouncing the name in the Italian style.

'And what's the diminutive? How does Mrs Aldous generally address her?'

'Bici,' said the nurse.

'When Dicky first saw the light, bless his heart, where did you tell him it came from?'

'Why, Mr Aldous, from the sun.'

'Work it out, Miss Williams, and I think you'll arrive at the origins of most of this so-called "bad" language.'

All the same, when the nurse was at supper, Mr Aldous went to the nursery where his son lay sleeping. On the way into the room he met his wife hurrying out, evidently on the verge of tears. She said: 'Oh, Richard, our boy is possessed by a devil! He just said, in his sleep: "For crying out loud, cease, you rousy sandwich!" Where did he ever hear a word like "cease"?''

Her husband sent her to bed, saying: 'Why, darling, little Dicky has had to suffer the impact of too many new sensations, too suddenly. The shock must be something like the shock of being born. Rest, sweetheart.' Then he went into the nursery and sat by the child's crib.

After a little while, stirring uneasily in his sleep, speaking in the accents of the gutters of the West, Dicky Aldous said quite clearly: 'Ah, shup! Aina kina गया rat!' – distinguishable to his father as: 'Ah, shut up! I ain't the kind of guy to rat!'

Then, tossing feverishly from side to side, and talking through his milk teeth, his face curiously distorted so that he spoke almost without moving his lips, Dicky Aldous said, in a baby talk with which I will not trouble your eyes or distract your attention by writing it phonetically: '. . . Listen, and get it right, this time, you son-of-a . . .' He added a string of expletives which, coming from him, were indescribably shocking. Perhaps horrifying is the better word because you can understand shock, being aware of its cause; but horror makes no sense. That is why

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it is horrible – there lies the quintessence of nightmare, in the truth divorced from reason.

Typically, the first thing Richard Aldous thought of was Henry James and *The Turn of the Screw*. How could this innocent child be saying words he could not possibly have heard in his tiny life? Now Mr Aldous began to suspect the doctors, who are notoriously loose of language off the record among themselves. But presently, in a tense whisper, while the entire face of the child seemed to age and alter, Dicky said: 'Dom – you take the big .45; Mac, take the cut-down snub-nose blue-barrel .38. What for? Because I'm telling you. A big gun looks five times bigger on a runt like Little Dominic. Get me? And a blue belly-gun looks twice as dangerous in the mitt of a big lug like Mac. Me, I take the Luger, because one look at a Luger, you know it's made for business . . . But empty, I want 'em empty . . . C'mon, let's have a look at that magazine, Dom . . . Mac, break me them barrels . . . Good! . . . You got an argument, Dom? Okay, so have I. I ain't got no ambition to graduate to be Number One, and in Montana, brother, they hang you up . . . Okay, okay, call it unscientific, but you'll do as I say; because, believe me, this job'll be pulled using those things just for show. My weapon is time. Cease, Dominic. . . . Gimme a feel of that .45. Empty. Good, let it stay like that . . . Okay, then, I want this straight, I want this right from the start. We'll go over this again . . .'

Then Dicky Aldous stopped talking. His face reassumed its proper contours, and he slept peacefully.

Mr Aldous met Miss Williams on the stairs. 'It's worrying me to death,' she said. 'I cannot for the life of me imagine where Dicky-darling picked up the word "cease".'

Mr Aldous said: 'I think, just for a few nights, Miss Williams, I'll sleep in his room.'

And so Mr Aldous did. To be accurate, he lay down on the nurse's bed, and stayed awake, listening. He made careful notes of what poor Dicky said in his sleep – and many of the things the child said were concerned with visual memory, which the boy could not have had, since he was born blind.

' . . . They's a whole knot o' cottonmouths on the island past Miller's Bend. What'll you give me if I show you? What, you never seen a cottonmouth? Give me something and I'll show you. It's a snake, see, a great big poison snake, and it's got a mouth like it's full of cotton, and poison teeth longer'n your finger. C'mon, give me what you got and I'll show you the cottonmouths,' Dicky said, his voice growing uglier. ' . . . What d'you mean, you ain't got nothing? You been wasting my time? Ever learn the Indian twist, so you can break a growed man's elbow? All right, boy, I'll show you for free . . . Oh, that hurts, does it? Too bad. A bit more pressure and it'll hurt you for keeps – like *that*. . . . You still airn't got nothing to see the cottonmouths all tangled in a knot? . . . Oh, you'll get it, will you? You'd better. And you owe me an extra dime for learning you the Indian twist . . . No sir, just for wasting my time I ain't going to show you them cottonmouths today – not till you bring me twenty cents, you punk, you. And then, maybe, I'll show you that nest o' diamond-back rattlesnakes at Geranium Creek. But if you don't deliver, Malachi Westbrook – mind me now – I'll show you the Seminole jaw-grip. That takes a man's head clear off. And I'll show it to you good, Malachi. Yes sir, me and Teddy Pinchbeck will sure show you good! Mind me now; meet me and Teddy Pinchbeck at the old Washington Boathouse eight o'clock tomorrow morning, and bring Charley Greengrass with you. He better have twenty cents with him, too, or else . . . '

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Mr Aldous wrote all this down. At about three o'clock in the morning, Dicky said: 'Okay, kids. You paid up. You're okay. Okay, I'll just borrow Three-Finger Mike's little old boat, and Teddy Pinchbeck and me'll take you and Charley Greengrass to look at them cottonmouths. Only see here, you kids, me and Teddy Pinchbeck got to pole you way past Burnt Swamp, and all the way to Miller's Bend. That'll cost 'em, won't it, Teddy? . . . You ain't got it? Get it. And stop crying – it makes me nervous, don't it, Teddy? And when I'm nervous I'm liable to show you the Indian hip-grip, so you'll never walk again as long as you live. You mind me now! . . .'

Dicky said no more that night. At about nine o'clock in the morning, Mr Aldous made an appointment with a psychologist, one Dr Asher who, finding himself caught on the horns of this dilemma – *carte blanche* and an insoluble problem – double-talked himself into one of those psychiatric serials that are longer than human patience. But what was Dr Asher to say? Little Dicky Aldous had no vision to remember with; there was nothing in his head upon which juvenile imagination might conceivably fall back.

It was by sheer accident that Mr Aldous met a lieutenant of detectives named Neetsfoot to whom he confided the matter, hoping against hope, simply because Neetsfoot had worked on the Rurik Duncan case.

• The detective said: 'That's very strange, Mr Aldous. Let's have it all over again.'

'I have it written down verbatim, Lieutenant.'

'I'd be grateful if you'd let me make a copy, Mr Aldous. And look – I have children of my own. My boy has had polio, in fact, and I've kind of got the habit of talking to kids without upsetting them. Would you have any objection – this is unofficial – would you have any objection to

my talking to your son a little bit?'

'What in the world for?' asked Mr Aldous.

Lieutenant Neetsfoot said: 'Mr Aldous, if you haven't got a clue to something, well, that's that. In that case, if you see what I mean, it doesn't even come within range of being understood. At a certain point you stop trying to understand it. Now sometimes something that makes absolutely no sense at all, flapping about in the dark, throws a switch. And there you've got a mystery.'

'I don't get what you're driving at, Lieutenant.'

'Neither do I, Mr Aldous. But I'll give you the leading points, if you like. *A* – I know all there is to know about Rurik Duncan; saw him electrocuted, in fact. And a miserable show he made of it. *B* – I don't like to dig these matters up, but your son, four years old and born blind, had one of Rurik's eyes grafted into his head by Dr Holliday. And now, *C* – the child is going word for word and point by point into details of things that happened about sixteen years before he was born and two thousand miles away!'

'Oh no, surely not!' cried Mr Aldous.

'Oh yes, surely so,' said the lieutenant. 'And geographically accurate, at that. What's more remarkable, your son has got the names right of people that were never heard of and who died before he was born. What d'you make of that? Teddy Pinchbeck was shot in a fight outside a church it must be ten, eleven years ago. A bad boy, that one. And where did I get my information? From Malachi Westbrook – he's a realtor, now. There *was* an old Washington Boathouse, and Malachi Westbrook's the man that tore it down to make space for Westbrook Landing. Charley Greengrass runs his late father's store. There *was* a Three-Finger Mike, but he just disappeared. There really is a Cottonmouth Island just past a Miller's Bend, and in the

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mating season it's one writhing mass. And Rurik Duncan *did* break Malachi Westbrook's arm, before your son was born. Well?'

'This I do not understand,' said Richard Aldous.

'Me neither. Mind if I sit with the boy a bit?'

'No, Lieutenant, no . . . But how on earth could he know about cottonmouths? He never saw one. He never saw anything, poor child. To be frank with you, neither my wife nor I have ever seen a cottonmouth snake. I simply don't get it.'

'Then you don't mind?'

'Go ahead by all means, Lieutenant,' said Mr Aldous.

Neetsfoot went ahead – in other words, he sacrificed two weeks of his vacation in a dead silence, listening by Dicky's bed while the child slept. Mrs Aldous was in the grip of a nervous breakdown, so that her husband was present only half the time. But he bears witness – and so, at a later date, does an official stenographer – to what Dicky Aldous said, in what was eventually termed his 'delirium'.

First, the child struggled left and right. It appeared to the detective that he was somehow trying to writhe away from something; that he was in the clutch of a nightmare. His temperature went up to 103 degrees, and then he said: 'Look. This is the set-up, you kids. The Pan keeps the engine running. Get that right from the start, Pan. Little Joe sticks a toothpick under the bell-push. I put the heat on. Okay? Okay!'

Lieutenant Neetsfoot knew what to make of this. The man who was called the Pan on account of his rigid face was driver for several gangsters; Little Joe Ricardo was a sort of assistant gunman who was trying to make the grade with the big mobs. The heat, as Neetsfoot construed it, was put on a Union leader named M'Turk, for whose murder Rurik Duncan was tried but acquitted for lack of evidence.

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M'Turk was shot down in his own doorway; the street was aroused less by the noise of the shot than by the constant ringing of M'Turk's doorbell, under which somebody had stuck a toothpick.

But all this had happened at least eight years before Dicky Aldous was born.

'... And this I don't quite get,' said Lieutenant Neets-foot.

'There is something distinctly peculiar here,' Mr Aldous said. 'But I won't have the child bothered.'

'I'm not bothering the child, Mr Aldous – the child's bothering me. Heaven's my judge, I haven't opened my mouth. Not even to smoke! The kid does all the talking, and Gregory takes it down on the machine. You can believe me when I tell you, there's something funny here. Your little boy has gone into details about the M'Turk shooting; and this I can't understand. Tell me, Mr Aldous, do you remember the details of M'Turk?'

'No, I can't say I do, Lieutenant.'

'Then how does the kid?'

'I must have told your people a thousand times; my son couldn't possibly have heard anything about the people or the events you keep harping on.'

'I know he couldn't, Mr Aldous. This is off the record and on my own time. That's understood, isn't it?'

'It is a most extraordinary situation, Lieutenant.'

'You can say that again.'

Mr Aldous said, with a kind of detached enthusiasm that somehow disgusted the detective: 'You know what? The eye of this man Rurik Duncan having been grafted, complete with optic nerve, it's almost as if the child's actually seeing through Rurik Duncan's optic nerve!'

'Almost as if,' said the lieutenant.

'But how?'

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'Ask the doctor, don't ask me.'

And Dr Holliday was, indeed, the fourth witness to the last and most important utterances of the boy into whose orbit he had grafted the right eye of Rurik Duncan. It happened, as previously, between two and three o'clock in the morning.

Dicky said: 'Now listen. You, Dom, listen. And you listen, Mac . . . You heard it before? Then hear it again. This is the way I want it, and this is the way it's going to be. Dom, you always were trigger-happy. First: no loads in the rods. I want these guns ice-cold. One thing I won't do, and that's hang. And in Montana they hang you on a rope. Never forget that . . . Second: follow my timing, and you can't go wrong. We beat the lights. Remember, it's two million and a half in small bills. Better men than you have died for less. My Uncle Gabe died through getting bitten in the leg by a hog. This way's more fun . . . Third: the short haul in the armoured truck, and the swift stash in the Rocks, you know where. Got it? Fourth: the quick scatter. Now somebody could get hurt. So let's get this right. Okay? I'll go over it again——'

At this point, Mr Aldous, carried away by sheer excitement, cried: 'Yes, but *exactly where* is the money? Where did we put it?'

Dicky sneered in his sleep: 'And exactly where d'you get that "*did*"? It ain't put there yet. . . . And who's "*we*"? Little Dom and Mac I told already. There ain't no more "*we*". Go burn me, mister, and sniff for it . . . *We*, crysakes! Well, I guess you *got* to be dumb, or you wouldn't be a cop. Okay. You want to know where the dough is? I'll tell you. It's in Montana. Got that wrote down? Montana. It's going to be loaded in a great big armoured truck in Butte. And taken where? —' The child laughed in a singularly ugly way. '— I'll be my pleasure

to tell you, mister: somewhere in Montana. All you got to do when I stash this dough is, scratch. Okay, Mr Dickins?'

'Wasn't Dickins the name of the District Attorney who offered Rurik Duncan his life if he would divulge the whereabouts of the stolen money?' whispered Mr Aldous.

Lieutenant Neetsfoot replied, not without bitterness: 'Yes, it was. For God's sake, shut up—I think you've already talked us out of that two and a half million. And here I've sat like a stone for fifteen days, and right at the end you must bust in and open your damn yap.'

Deeply hurt, Mr Aldous said: 'My son has always responded to my voice.'

The lieutenant looked at him with disdain, and then said, in a carefully controlled voice: 'Yes, Mr Aldous. Your son has always responded to your voice, Mr Aldous. But damn it, that wasn't your son who was talking—that was Rurik Duncan! That was Rurik Duncan running over orders with Little Dominic and MacGinnis before the truck was snatched and the money stashed away; I told you to keep quiet like me, I begged you to keep your mouth shut like I did, But no, your son has always responded to your voice. Congratulations, Mr Aldous; you've got the costliest voice in the world—it's just talked us out of ten per cent of two million six hundred thousand dollars!'

They sat by the crib until dawn but, his fever past, Dicky Aldous, perspiring freely, talked no more in his sleep.

When he awoke, his father, who had an unshakable faith in the power of his voice to arouse response in his hitherto blind son, said: 'Now, Dicky-darling, tell Daddy-dear about Montana.'

'Want to see blue,' said Dicky; and became engrossed in the colour and the shape of a large red non-poisonous nylon teddy bear of which he had previously known only the texture.

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And from that day to this he has not talked of Montana. His memory of events preceding Dr Holliday's operation is rapidly fading. Dr Holliday, who visits the house from time to time, has put forward a half-hearted theory that, by some unexplained process, the regenerated nervous tissue, heavily charged with electricity, retained and conveyed the visual memory of Rurik Duncan only while this tissue was knitting. It may come back, he says, in adult life; or, on the other hand, it may not.

Lieutenant Neetsfoot, whom Mr Aldous regards as a 'character', pays a visit every other Sunday. He likes to play with the little boy. It was he who said to me: 'This is unofficial, off the record; but I'm pretty observant. When I was a rookie I learned to watch you without seeming to. And I can tell you, there's something very, very funny about that kid's eye when he thinks he isn't being observed. He's seven now. I'm due to retire nine years from now. Call me crazy, but believe me – when that kid is old enough to have a car of his own and take a vacation without anybody else along, wherever he goes I'll follow him.'

Here, for the time being, the matter rests.

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Time is a liar and a tease. Time is a confidence trickster. Time sells you that which is not, and which never has been. The Devil makes capital by selling Retrospect in three dimensions to fools like Faust who, at the cost of their immortal souls, want to capture their 'youth'. How often have we heard the voice of Ulcerated Misery, wise with the wisdom of a quarter of a century of inter-office knife-play, groaning in one of those discreetly dim bars off Madison Avenue: *If only I could have my time over again!*

You do not catch me that way. I have a profound contempt for the 'Ifs' of History – a deep distrust of such idle speculation – because I know that if I had my time over again I should do, all over again, all the things I have done that make me what I am. Otherwise, I should not be myself, should I? No, I would not have my time over again as a gift, but prefer to dree my weird, as the Scotsmen say, meaning: 'follow my destiny'. . . . If the Devil approached me with a contract whereby, in consideration of my immortal soul, I should receive a hundred years of youth and an unlimited drawing account on a Federal Bank, I would tell him to go to hell.

Si la jeunesse savait! Si la vieillesse pouvait! – so yearns the stupid catch-word, meaning: 'If youth had the experience of old age; and old age the vigour of youth!' These catchy French epigrams go down smoothly, but stick in the discriminating craw. Can you imagine anything more repulsive than a teenager, in all his frenetic vigour, with the

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outlook, the libido, and the untickled appetites of a decadent old clubman?

The most incorrigible Time-Over-Againers are generally to be found in what may be described as the self-huckstering professions – I mean, Advertising men, Real Estate speculators and Journalists – people who are incredibly wise long after the event. And in their professions, in which life is kaleidoscopic, it is always after the event. These young-old-timers must necessarily be one jump behind competition. They are living on borrowed time . . . They may be seen and heard in Michael's Pub, or the Absinthe House, about 12.45 any afternoon, feeling the tatty fur on their tongues with their loose-fitting teeth, and talking out of the corners of their mouths farthest away from you (for fear of offending you with bad breath) of what might have been perhaps, would be whether, and should have been if.

Some of the very worst offenders in this respect are the elderly, brilliant desk-men, features men and editorial writers in Fleet Street. They earn good money, and are much looked up to; newcomers in the newspaper business are honoured by their attention and, figuratively speaking, hang on their leaden or purple lips. More often than not, they are generous with their money, and with their advice; and, if there is one kind of person they like better than the worldly wise one whom they knew 'when', it is the eager youngster with ideals to denigrate.

Their cynicism is sad, kindly, even paternal . . . but it is, nonetheless, the voice of weariness and disillusionment. . . . They have seen the elephant and heard the owl, and (confidentially, and between us) can reevaluate their zoological categories. They take a kind of melancholy delight in making burlesque of what they dare not debunk. Towards the end of the evening, when they are

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expected at home, where their friends are not welcome, they generally say, with a lingering, nostalgic, affectionate handshake: 'Oh, my boy, if I were *your* age!' . . .

. . . And when they leave, you have a feeling of something lost, or rather mislaid: in some pyramidal shadow in one of the corners of the pub, they have left something of themselves behind; something ragged with disuse . . .

When I was in Fleet Street, the Night Editor of the *Daily Special* was such a man. His name was Bohemund Raymond, and his incapacity for hard liquor had made him notorious from Blackfriars to Temple Bar. I say 'incapacity', with good reason, on the assumption that a characteristic of the Arabs. Take, say, the word *strong*: Now, as long as anyone had known him, Bohemund Raymond had never been quite sober. I believe that his appearance of drunkenness was exaggerated by a peculiar habit of speech: he spoke with an American-sounding, Devon drawl, and had, moreover, that inability to pronounce two successive consonants which is supposed to be characteristic of the Arabs. Take, say, the word *strong*: Bohemund Raymond would pronounce it something like 'jssitirong'. But he would talk with such vehemence that this trick of speech lent a kind of dramatic colour to whatever he said.

Once, in the Punch Tavern, some old soldier, half-demented with malaria, who had been trying to sell an article about elephants' tusks during the silly season, had the nerve to say, in Bohemund Raymond's hearing: 'No, I mean to say, blast it! Was in Palestine with Allenby, blast it! I talk Wog. That man talks with a *chi-chi*, like a confounded Wog. (No, really, I mean to say, after all, what?)'

Whereupon Bohemund Raymond looked at the man steadily for a long time, and said, in his peculiarly resonant

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voice: 'By "Wog" I take it this derelict means "Arab". Why, of course! By God, my fathers took Antioch when this fellow's people were herding swine! Damn it,' shouted Bohemund Raymond, pointing to one of the arteries in his throat, 'in this vein flows the blood of Bohemund, of Richard Lion-Heart, of Godfrey de Bouillon! My ancestress was a Saracen princess. Damn your eyes, my own mother was named after her – Asia Raymond, short for Ayesha! . . . "Wog"!'

The old soldier, fatuous with bottled beer, said: 'No, but really, I mean to say, after all – what I mean, all those fathers, eh, and only one mother, what?'

Then Bohemund Raymond said: 'I'll "Wog" you,' and so he did, with a pewter pot. And he saw to it that the article about elephants' tusks was rejected the following day – threatened, indeed, to resign if it were accepted; so that the Features Editor, another disappointed man, who hated him bitterly, decided that this was the time to take a year off to write a great novel . . .

. . . If we had our time over again, we hacks would be all great novelists. As it is, all we want is one clear year to make up for lost time . . . The Features Editor was last seen crawling into the Black Swan in Farringdon Road, next door to the Features Syndicate, where stables of pseudonymous scribblers work eighteen hours a day for a guinea a thousand words; they emerge typewriter-happy, so that if you ring a glass with your fingernail within ear-shot while they are forking up their sausage-and-mash, they are apt to tear an invisible sheet of copy out of an imaginary platen, and shout: 'Boy!'

It was not that Bohemund Raymond was mean, or vindictive. In general, he was very generous and, in quarrel, magnanimous. Only he could not bear to be touched in his ticklish spot – his ancestry. As everybody knows,

Phoenician blood ran strong in the west of England, where his family came from, long before the Romans arrived; so that, to this day, you may see hawk-faced, black-avised, strangely clannish, subtle, proud and quarrelsome alien-looking men and women around Marazion. But Bohemund Raymond disclaimed descent from these Vikings of the Levant.

No – he insisted that he was a lineal descendant of a great crusader and one Princess Ayesha, who was carried off, baptized out of hand, and married by his ancestor after the Battle of Antioch. This Princess Ayesha, he insisted – in the hours that passed after he had put the paper to bed, and before he put himself to bed – was divinely inspired, a prophetess, something like Cassandra of Troy . . . only more so.

It was the Princess Ayesha, said he, who predicted the Fall of Antioch, and the Battle of the Spear. He could recount, with extraordinary vividness, the circumstances of that famous charge of the Crusaders. It seems that a certain monk had a revelation, in a dream, of the whereabouts of a buried spearhead. This spearhead, said the monk, was a holy relic: it had been used by a Roman soldier at the foot of the Cross, so that whoever followed it must be certain of victory over the hosts of Mahound. The spearhead was dug up, the crusaders followed it as a banner, and won a wonderful fight so that eventually Antioch fell . . .

As he told of this, one of his wild, faraway looks would come into Bohemund Raymond’s dark-pouched black eyes and he would say: ‘And I, too, my friends, shall perish by the ancient bronze-spear in the right hand of my ancient hereditary enemy!’

When he had drink taken – and when had he not? – Bohemund Raymond frequently made such cryptic oracular prophecies. We happened to remember this one,

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when he died of blood poisoning in 1938, having run a rusty brass paper fastener into his left thumb . . . It was argued that bronze and brass are fundamentally akin; and who was Bohemund's hereditary enemy but Bohemund himself?

By that time he had drunk himself out of half a dozen important jobs in Fleet Street – gulped himself down, as I may say, swallowed himself – so that, at the time of his death, he was Fiction Editor of the *Evening Special*; a creature whom we fiction writers like to whisper of as one of the lowest forms of life. The news of his death was received as the news of such deaths is generally received in the Fleet Streets of all the cities in the world. There was, as usual, the maudlin man who, having made his own reputation in another line of the business, and seeing in this minor tragedy the handwriting on his own wall growled: 'We won't see *his* like again,' and went to the Press Club in search of mourners of his own generation.

There were cubs, gnashing their milk-teeth among the umbles, the scattered guts of the big kills, who, hoping one day to pull down their own bull, watched for a forward movement in the pack. Some gloated: the elephant-tusk man maintained that it was his story that had caused the death of Bohemund Raymond – he said that it was still going the rounds, pinned together by the same paper fastener, which was covered with verdigris. (His pension was not due until next Tuesday and, meanwhile, although he hated to accept a drink without being able to return it . . . etcetera . . .)

An old advertising man, who had entertainment-expensed himself into the gutter of the small-ad pedlars, and who lived in a wild, woolly world of hearsay, said that Bohemund Raymond had survived that long by black-mailing Lord Lovejoy, the baron who owned the *Daily*

Special, the *Evening Special*, and the *Sunday Special*. Trust Bohemund to know where the body was buried, he said, with a beery wink, nodding like a porcelain china-man . . . until one of the old guard, 'Swindle-sheet' Morris, gasping over half an inch of cigarette – mysteriously, he never had more or less than half an inch of cigarette – told him to be damned for a dirty little advertising man.

'Bohemund Raymond would never soil his hands on such,' said 'Swindle-sheet' Morris, 'but I don't mind if I do, you little mess, you! Bohemund was my friend, and I say so to the whole bleeding pub-load of you. You are not fit to drink the water he washed his socks in, and if any of you want to deny it, come on! Single-handed or mob-handed, come on! . . . Will you stand by, Gerald?'

I said: 'Oh, sure, Morris.'

Then, with emotion, 'Swindle-sheet' Morris said: 'We knew him in good times and bad, old Bohemund – didn't we, Gerald? We were cubs under Bohemund; weren't we, Gerald? Why, when the old *World-Globe* went bust and was bought by Lovejoy, who predicted it? Bohemund Raymond! Why, you little layabouts, I see him as plain as I see you here – plainer – saying: "Morris, the World is coming to an end, and the very Globe will change." And that, mind you, was in 1917——'

It may have been, of course, that Bohemund Raymond was referring to coming world events, which were casting their shadow before at that date; and to possible changes in the outlines of countries on the map of Europe. That rickety liberal newspaper, the *World-Globe*, did not become defunct until 1929. But 'Swindle-sheet' Morris, like his hero, was no man to argue with, when he was on a theme. He went on:

' . . . Bohemund was like a mother and father to me – he

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tore up every word I wrote, he treated me like a dog, he bashed me into shape, he made me what I am.' Didn't he, Gerald?'

Since I could not very well say that I did not remember, and that, in any case, while 'Swindle-sheet' Morris was what he was, I did not much care for his shape, I could only say: 'You've got something there, Morris.'

'Gerald remembers,' said Morris – although, at the time of which he spoke, I was still in school, and wanted to be an engine-driver – Bohemund Raymond was like a Bible prophet. In the old days at the Press Club – you remember, Gerald – when Edgar Wallace used to turn up? Why, I remember when the Chess Champion Capablanca turned up as Bohemund's guest. We let him in because, stretching a point, he was one of us – wrote about chess for a dago paper. Bohemund Raymond played him three games. And if Bohemund Raymond had moved his king's bishop in the fifth move of the second game, he would have checkmated Capablanca in the thirteenth move. He showed me afterwards, on the board . . .'

At this, Jack Cantwhistle, the old crime reporter, a kindly, sensitive man under the scar-tissue, said: 'Yes, Bohemund was the ablest man in the Street. God knows what he might have got to be if it wasn't for his "ifs and ans". Poor old Bohemund had a bee in his bonnet – he always had to *foresee*. No part of a newspaperman's job, *foreseeing* – very dangerous practice. We're all entitled to a bit of guess-work; but you keep your guesses to yourself. Poor old Bohemund reminded me, in a way, of the prophet Jonah – you remember, the one the whale swallowed, whose feelings were hurt because Nineveh was not destroyed after he had definitely said it was going to be. To be on the safe side, a prophet ought to put in his "if" *before* the event, not after. "If" after the event simply

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makes a man look ridiculous. I'm not saying a word against my old friend Bohemund, Morris, and I won't hear a word said against him. Only, when he had one of his funny turns – especially after he'd been on a blind – he had to get didactic. Made himself a laughing-stock, in fact.'

'Swindle-sheet' Morris said: 'I don't know about that. When he first took me on, I worshipped the ground he trod on. But he said to me: "Get on the job. Keep your thanks. You will live to make a hissing and a mockery of me!" . . . And Lord forgive me, so I did make a hissing and a mockery of Bohemund Raymond 'in the years to come. Laugh if you like, Jack – his prophecies always came true, almost. And as for my old friend Bohemund's having a glass of beer once in a while between meals; why, he *had* to, because he took things so much to heart. It was only later in life, when they got him down, that he got, well, the least little bit sozzled. He got away from the world that way, and clarified his intellect.'

The decayed advertising man sniggered: 'Bohemund clarified his intellect all right, that time Lord Lovejoy sent him to Scotland for six months! Remember? The time he started seeing snakes and mermaids and midgets and things in the office?'

'Swindle-sheet' Morris shouted: 'Why, you lavatory! Bohemund's intellect was never clearer than when he saw those snakes, etcetera. They said it was d.t.s, but it wasn't. I know, because I was his assistant, at the time, damn it all! . . .'

Then he went on to say that, at that time, in the spring of 1930, Bohemund's wife ran away from him. To her, as to everyone else, he had prophesied: 'You shall make a hissing and a mockery of me.' And so she did. This prophecy, at least, he forced to come true by making a hissing and a mockery of himself. His wife having deserted

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him, Bohemund Raymond became crazy on an insane mixture of: *'Can such things be?'* and *'I told you so!'* He went on working, however, with deadly efficiency, but like a man in a dream.

It was rumoured, then, that he never went to bed at all; that he souped himself up for the super-human efforts of each new night with whisky, as a smash-and-grab robber soups up an old stolen car for one mad dash in the few minutes he plans to snatch between the smashing of the jeweller's window and the dash to the hide-out . . . So Bohemund Raymond blasted and rattled at unnatural speed from sunset to sunrise, leaving behind him a trail of startled faces, shattered glass, scattered jewels, and shrill whistles.

Now those who say that Lord Lovejoy tolerated Bohemund Raymond because that phenomenal newspaperman 'had something on him' do the memory of the Press Baron an injustice. Everyone had something on Lord Lovejoy, those, that is, who hadn't invented something to have on him; and much he cared! Lord Lovejoy was a ruthless man, an unscrupulous man, a pig-headed and, at times, brutal man. But he was neither a coward nor a fool. Nor was he a bad man, at heart. Somewhere encysted in his beefy soul was a little aching germ of imprisoned love and wonder. He liked you, or he didn't. True, he might like or dislike you for the wrong reasons; but he was as staunch a friend as he was implacable an enemy. For some reason he had a fondness for Bohemund Raymond – made excuses for him, and later thrust him into positions of trust if only to justify himself.

One evening – you could never predict the movements of Lord Lovejoy – returning from Australia where he had just bought five hundred square miles of virgin forest to shred up and pulp for his newspapers, he looked in at the

office, dressed in a mackinaw. The night doorman, who was drunk and new to the job, asked him who the devil he thought he was. 'I am Lord Lovejoy,' said the little potentate.

'Oh yes? And I am Bombardier Billy Wells,' said the doorman, using the name of the man who was, at that time, heavyweight boxing champion of England . . . Lord Lovejoy then said: 'And how do you like the *Daily Special*?' The doorman said; 'Och, I wouldn't use it to wrap tripe-and-chips in. Indade, I wouldn't carry the damned rag away with me atall, atall, only my little bhoy Mickey likes to colour in the Fashion Section, bless his heart, wid his little box o' paints.'

At this point, Lord Lovejoy's secretary arrived, breathless, and took his master upstairs to the office with the onyx desk. There, Lord Lovejoy said: 'That man Bombardier Billy Wells. Take him off the door. Start a new Children's Section. Make him Editor. Get Circulation. What we need is an Empire-wide Printing Competition for children under fourteen. Five thousand pounds in prizes and scholarships . . . You were three minutes late. You're fired . . . Where's Bohemund Raymond? . . . Never mind, I'll go myself . . .'

So Lord Lovejoy walked into the News Room, and there was Bohemund Raymond drinking a colourless liquid that smelled of juniper berries out of a teacup. The night's work was nearly over. Poor Raymond's right hand was bleeding — he had impaled it on the spike, that stake which is driven through the heart of rejected copy. Lord Lovejoy said to him: 'He'llo, Raymond! See anything new?'

Then Bohemund Raymond replied, in his double-clipped sonorous voice: 'I see serpents. The road ahead is full of maddened beasts. Yes, I see the Mermaid, on dry land, and I hear help mournful cries . . . Help! Help! A

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tiger is loose! There is a crocodile under the floor, and a giraffe is looking in at the window, voiceless, baring his teeth. Between his legs run little wizened dwarfs in spangled tights——'

'—I'll tell you what it is, Bohemund, old man,' said Lord Lovejoy, 'you've been on the dooze, and you'd better lay off. Come on, after all—I bar seeing snakes in office hours. Take three months' holiday with pay, and go to my place in Scotland. One more peep out of you, and I'll fire you.' Then he called his secretary and said: 'Oh, Spray—you were three minutes late tonight. Losing grip. Need vacation. So does Bohemund Raymond. Pack up and go to Loth Lovejoy with him at once. But if I hear only one drop—one drop, mind!—of liquor has passed his lips in the twelve weeks, as from this moment, you are fired this time once and for all. Get cracking!'

After a few more serious words with Bohemund Raymond, the press baron concluded: '. . . I have your solemn word of honour then—no liquor for three months. Otherwise, you're through. Meet Spray, and scram. Anything extraordinary happens, let me know. 'Bye now.'

So Bohemund Raymond left for Scotland with the teetotal secretary, Spray. They had not been gone ten hours, when one of Lord Lovejoy's private phones rang, by one of his bedsides, and the voice of Bohemund Raymond, shaky but calm, said: 'You said tell you if anything extraordinary happens. Raymond calling from Dogworthy Junction. Listen. The Mermaid is dying on the platform. Professor Gooch is frantic for salt sea-water. She is groaning, and her poor skin is getting dull. She stinks of fish . . . One of the seven dwarfs has broken his leg, and his tiny wife is tying up his wounds with her spangled tights! Hold on—there is a tiger loose in the streets, and a rat with orange-coloured teeth, five feet long, chewing tobacco . . .

and the giraffe, poor beast, cut his neck on the glass of my window——'

Lord Lovejoy rang off, got through to the office, said: 'Fire Raymond and Spray,' and read himself back to sleep with *The Little Flowers of St Francis*.

Next morning, however, there was a report of the affair in all the other papers. Bohemund Raymond's train had collided with a circus train, and for a few hours many of the side-show exhibits were loose around Dogworthy Junction. Professor Gooh's genuine Mermaid, an unhappy Manatee cow that was depicted on the posters as a voluptuous blonde with a fish's tail, combing her hair at a hand-glass and singing melodiously, but looked in fact like a sea-elephant with breasts, fell out of her broken tank of salt water, and bellowed her last at the stationmaster's feet. The Biggest Rat in the World – a capybara, or water-pig – ran away on its long legs and settled down in a nearby kitchen garden; the owner of which, a maiden lady who was afraid of mice, went out of her mind. One of a team of midget acrobats did, indeed, break his leg – the *Daily Flash* ran a big picture of his wife, thirty inches high, applying first aid. A spavined giraffe sustained injuries from broken glass, and a tiger, too old and broken-spirited to care, had to be carried back to its cage by six volunteers, led by the local policeman who directed operations with a pitchfork. “

Thus, Lord Lovejoy sent a Memo: – *Unfire Raymond; Spray* – and Bohemund Raymond was back in the office within a week, drunker than ever.

Mr Spray, said 'Swindle-sheet' Morris, at last was put in charge of the Astrology Department; from which, somehow, he made his way to the Sports Section as a predictor of horse-racing results under the nom de plume of 'Pin-point' . . .

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. . . It was a funny story, considered objectively; but although everyone in Fleet Street had been laughing over it for years, now Morris found no pleasure in the laughter he gave rise to. He had told the story humorously, out of force of habit. But there was grief in his heart. He said to me: 'Let's get out of here, Gerald, and I'll tell you how I made a hissing and a mockery of poor old Bohemund Raymond. God knows, it was all in fun. I might say, in fact, that the joke I played on him had a salubrious effect, because he didn't touch drink in any form afterwards until just before he died. But he found out about the trick I played on him, and I don't think he ever forgave me for it. Bohemund wasn't the man to bear a grudge, Gerald; but I should hate to think there was any hard feelings . . . But confidentially, between us, you know, he *did* ask for it, the time I'm going to tell you about . . . Walk back to my place, and I'll tell you.'

'Swindle-sheet' Morris had a three-room flat over a second-hand furniture shop in Red Lion Street. He found some bottled beer, two packets of potato-crisps and a jar of pickled red cabbage, and made room for them on the sitting-room table by pushing aside a typewriter, a hat and a little box of laundry ready for the wash. 'You may find the place a little stuffy,' he said, 'but I don't like to open the window in case the papers get blown away . . .' He sniffed, and said: 'Yes, I burned some kippers the day before yesterday; and all that junk, those sofas and mattresses downstairs, *do* have a bit of a pong. Miracle how the old crook finds a market for 'em. Well, there's life for you, Gerald – you're never so poor but there's someone else a bit poorer who wants what you've got . . . See that typewriter? That's *the* typewriter.'

'*The* typewriter?' I asked, looking at it. It was a big, old-

fashioned desk model, badly battered, such as you may see in any newspaper office; a rakish, promiscuous, disreputable old typewriter, it had submitted to hard usage by a thousand pairs of heavy hands, and adjusted itself to none. On the front of the frame, heavily stencilled, was the inscription: PROPERTY OF LOVEJOY PRESS—NOT TO BE TAKEN AWAY'!

'His typewriter, Bohemund's typewriter,' said 'Swindle-sheet' Morris. 'He took a fancy to it, and wouldn't use any other. Wouldn't let anybody else use it, either. He said it *knew* him—said it practically typed of its own accord . . . An uncle of mine, who also used to get paralytic every Saturday night, used to ride out to his favourite pub in an old pony and trap. When he'd had a skinful, the landlord would simply chuck him into the trap and the old pony would take him home all on her own . . . Bohemund used to feel about this old machine the same way my uncle felt about that old pony. So I pinched it for a keepsake after he died.

'Of course, I dare say you know, Bohemund really was a marvellous touch-typist, faster and more accurate than any girl in the office. But—trust him—he had a system of typing all his own: he used to kind of cross his hands, like a pianist, so that it made you giddy to watch him. And the funny thing is, the tighter he got, the faster he got. We all have our faults, you know. Well, I dare say you remember that one of Bohemund's little weaknesses was bragging. Sometimes he was bragging about that so-called Saracen princess; and sometimes it was that crusader—depending on which he happened to fancy for the moment. But two things he never stopped boasting about: one was what he called his "Gift of Prophecy", and the other was his "Infallible Accuracy" on this typewriter. He used to

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call it "Rataplan" – which, according to his cock-and-bull story, was the name of an old war-horse that belonged to this crusading ancestor of his. It seems this here horse was stone-blind in both eyes, and still the best horse in the Army because it couldn't see danger.

'Well, you know, Bohemund and I were always the best of friends; but there comes a time when even your best friend can get on your nerves a bit – especially in a year like 1937, when every lousy office-boy went around prophesying like Isaiah, and the very beggars in the streets were saying they doubted whether they had done wisely, putting Chamberlain in power. It got to be a bit of a bore. You went to bed in the concentration camps, you woke up in Berschtesgaden; and you had Goebbels for breakfast, Hitler for lunch, Ribbentrop for tea, and Goering for dinner. That was the time when everybody knew all about everything. You remember: Hitler, Goering and Co. were drug fiends, and drunkards, and lunatics who lived by giving each other medals; and there weren't any real generals in the German Army, because Hitler had shot them all and put cocaine addicts and perverts in their places; and how the German Army was mostly propaganda – Goebbels had one crack company of infantry march past a camera and ran the same reel six times over. It was impossible to get anybody to talk about anything else. Even my charwoman used to wake me up in the morning with the impenetrability of the Maginot Line, and gallant little Belgium . . .

'It got so that we dreaded meeting old Bohemund Raymond in the pub. Of course, he was a thousand times worse than anybody else – especially since old Lovejoy had put him on to writing that famous series of editorials that always ended: *What Are You Going To Do About It?* – like Cato's: *Carthage Must Be Destroyed!* He was

having the time of his life, old Bohemund, prophesying to his heart's content. We had to cut the juiciest bits of his leaders; but even what was left took a gloomy, frightening kind of turn. But Lord Lovejoy stuck to his guns out of sheer obstinacy. He was able to say, "I told you so," later on; but those editorials didn't make us very popular at the time.

'And all the while Bohemund was drinking like a drain. He used to be half sozzled before opening time; went on steadily till three o'clock in the Pig's Head; knocked off for a quick sandwich, and was at it again in the Press Club until about an hour before his deadline. He'd just about manage to get to the office, and flop into his chair. Then it was marvellous to watch him. He never hesitated. He got steady as a rock. He couldn't see an inch in front of him, he was so pickled, but he didn't have to. He'd snap in a sheet of copy paper, and rattle off a thousand words of perfect prose, touch-typing like a conjurer, and staring into space with those big shiny eyes so as to give you the creeps. It would be all over in forty-five minutes. The boy would pick up the copy, and Bohemund would fall into a taxi and go home.

'Well, one day Lord Lovejoy sent him to France to look at the Maginot Line. He locked up his old typewriter Rataplan as usual, and gave me the key of the cupboard to hold. And when he was gone, I got this wicked idea of mine. I went to a typewriter mechanic, who was a pal of mine, and I said to him: "Alf, there's a little job I want you to do for me, just for a lark. Take all the letters off the type-bars on this machine, and put them back all jumbled up. Leave the keys as they are, only mix me up all the letters; so that, for instance, if somebody hits an A, he'll get a Question-Mark, and so forth. Only you've got to be ready to put that type back exactly as it was before, overnight, at an hour's

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notice. There's a fiver in it for you," I said.

'And so he did. I locked old Rataplan back in her cupboard and waited. Couple of days later, Bohemund turns up again in the Pig's Head, full to the gills with armagnac—worse than I'd ever seen him. He went straight on to gin. I gave him his key. We asked him: "What news, Bohemund? What do you know?" And what was our surprise when he simply turned round and said: "You wait and see!"—nothing more. But his eyes were full of something more dangerous than brandy; I thought: *Either he's drunk himself off his rocker at last, or he's in a bad fever.*

'Now I had to go out of town for the afternoon. I kept thinking about the trick I'd played, and at last I phoned the Press Club to tell him about it, and warn him to use some other machine. But he'd left the Press Club early, having told a few fellows that he was going to astound the world with the greatest prophecy of all time. I buzzed the office. Bohemund had staggered in, got out the typewriter, touch-typed his piece as usual, and reeled out of the office, shouting: "It is achieved! I've done it!"

'As soon as I got back to town late that night I went straight to the office, and asked about Bohemund's leader. There was some little excitement about it: when the editor saw the piece, he yelled blue murder for Bohemund; but he was nowhere to be found. It appears that instead of going home, he'd gone to the Turkish bath in Jermyn Street where they had to call the police; seems he wrapped himself in towels and made a veil of a check loincloth, and stood in the Hot Room screaming gibberish. When they hauled him out, finally, he said he was the Princess Ayesha, prophesying. They recognised him at the station, and didn't charge him. So he went and slept it off. Meantime, I got Alf to fix up the machine again, having, of course, had

a duplicate key made for the cupboard; and put it back as Bohemund left it.

'First thing in the morning, Lord Lovejoy phoned him and told him to come around to the office, immediately if not sooner; which he did. Now what Lord Lovejoy said to poor old Bohemund at that interview I never quite knew. But knowing old Lovejoy I can pretty well guess. I can tell you this much: I didn't feel easy in my mind when I went to the Pig's Head for a pie at noon; but when Bohemund came in I was absolutely appalled by the sight of his face. It was always pale in a creamy kind of way. Now it was like curds and whey.

'The barmaid reached automatically for the gin, but Bohemund said: "A ginger-ale, if you please, Miss Broom." She nearly dropped the bottle, she was so surprised. He said to me: "Morris, I'm on the wagon - I'm on the wagon for life. Look at this." And he fished out of his pocket a couple of sheets of copy paper, that looked as if they'd been crumpled into a ball and then smoothed out again. "Lovejoy chucked it in my face," he said. "He threatened to fire me, as usual. But when I saw this stuff, for the first time in my life I could only apologise. I said something must have gone wrong with my typewriter. Then Lovejoy asked me: Well, what *was* this famous leader I had been shouting about? *And for the life of me I couldn't remember a word of it!* I went back to the office to look at old Rataplan. Morris - there is nothing wrong with my typewriter! I must have gone out of my mind. Chuck this stuff away Morris, and promise me you'll never breathe a word to a soul about this!"

'I promised, and I kept my word. But Alf squealed in the end, and as Bohemund had prophesied, I was responsible for making a bigger hissing and mockery of him than anyone else in the Street. But before he found out,

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he didn't touch a drink for close on a year; so perhaps he was the better for it, after all.'

'Swindle-sheet' Morris opened a drawer and rummaged in a litter of souvenirs – racing cards, autographed medals, and what not – and took out two crumpled sheets of yellow flimsy copy paper. He said: 'I didn't chuck it away. I kept it. I'm funny about mementoes. Can you imagine old Lovejoy's face when he saw this?'

I took the papers and read:

*Waf iakh aaumqa lbala ssad tunsabal mash
naqatal ruma niyan andzu hooralhi lalalga deed.*

*O, ulanya squtay uhuma. Hak azas at taraan
quadar.*

*Way a tazauag alhila lwal sa leebta khtb urgad dubzee
al alf rigl waya temzali kfeea amda mual ginse eal ass
faree.*

*Way a tazauag assal eebalkhu ttafmaa ssal eebalma
akoof feel nari wldami khennayal tahemua lkhamlual
assad takhtal qadeebwa lfas wassal eebal maksoor.*

*Way a ssaadual assa dubaadi zali kmaalni srwatu alaq
alduf daamin aqda miha.*

*Wuy a nazilu ragou lonlaar goulal ahubi esmbaida
ti annis rdubba nlahualf rigl waya atass amalnis rufeea
azlate hekhish yataaldu bikhat ayataza wagafee aam
(alfwa tiss umiy aussit teen) takh ttaleaalass adalmug
annekhzee raasan nistr.*

*Waf eehazi hialsa na alsa natalkham soonmin
kharbal alfazya assoo duassala amqem mamana
alatwar tafa at fau qaalkhar abiyu alaanga adialar
dalmah rooka.*

'I can just imagine,' I said. 'Mind if I take a copy?'
'If you like, Gerald. But what for?'

'One of these days I might write the story down,' I said. 'In my *mémoires*, or something.'

'Swindle-sheet' Morris said gloomily: 'Can't hurt. Poor Bohemund can't sue you now . . . Only if you sell the yarn to a magazine, you might remember to give me a twenty-five per cent cut, old man?'

I must have told 'Swindle-sheet' Morris's story to a dozen people, in the years that followed. You must know that the oftener you tell a story the less likely you are to write it: you bore yourself with the story; it grows stale on you; you talk yourself out of it. This story would never have been written if my old friend, Dr Marengo, had not come to my house to wish me *bon voyage* when I was leaving for America in April 1955. Dr Marengo is a most extraordinary man. He is best known, of course, as Kem, the political cartoonist; but he is also famous as a political scientist, an expert on international law and a linguist. He speaks and writes seventeen European and Oriental languages with perfect fluency and accuracy.

While we chatted discursively of this and that, as old friends will, I was turning over an old box-file full of unconsidered scraps of paper. And there, among hieroglyphic notes which had lost their meaning and newspaper clippings the significance of which I had forgotten, I found my copy of Bohemund Raymond's leader. I handed it to Kem and said: 'Here you are. You're good at cryptograms. What do you make of this one?'

He took the paper, put in his monocle, and stopped eating salted peanuts for several minutes while he concentrated on the words before him. Then he said: 'But, my dear Gerald, this is not a cryptogram at all. It is, actually, pure Arabic written phonetically, as far as that is possible, in Roman letters — only some of the words are broken up,

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and others are run together. One needs only to read it aloud, and it becomes quite clear.'

'What!' I said. 'Arabic? Did I hear you say *Arabic?*'

'Certainly . . .

*'Wafī dkher aa' uam qalf al ássad tūnsab al mashnaqat'
al rumaniya aand zuhoor al hilāl gadeed.*

Oulan yásqut ayúhuma. Hákaza sáttara alqádar . . .

. . . means, in English:

*'In the last year of the Heart of the Lion, the Roman
Gallows must stand against New Moon.*

Neither may fall. So it is written . . .

. . . That is the accurate pronunciation and a fair translation of the first paragraph, for example. Shall I——'

'—Roman Gallows?' I cried. 'That's the Cross! New Moon—Mohammedan Crescent! Last year of the Heart of the Lion—the Crusade, in which Richard the Lion-Hearted died!'

'Exactly, Gerald, in 1199,' said Kem. 'And what do you make of the second paragraph? . . .

*Wayatazáuag' alhilāl wal' saleeb takht búrg ad'dúb
zee al alf rigl, wa yátem'zalik fee aam dāmu al ginsee al
assfáree . . .*

. . . This says, in English:

*'Cross and Crescent Moon shall be married under the
Symbol of the Bear with 1,000 Legs. This is in the Year
of the Blood of the Yellow Men . . .*

I said: 'Why, Kem, obviously this refers to the U.S.S.R.!

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The Bear with a Thousand Legs is Russia – Cross and Crescent Moon is meant to be Hammer and Sickle! Go on!’

Kem said: ‘Freely translated, the third paragraph says:

‘Cross and Crook shall wed Crooked Cross in Fire and Blood when Lion is devoured by Lamb under Rod and Axe and Broken Cross . . .’

I shouted: ‘The Russo-German Pact! Hammer and Sickle shall wed Swastika when Lion (that’s Britain) is devoured by Lamb (Hitler’s astronomical sign was the Lamb) under Mussolini’s Fasces and the Nazi Swastika!’

Kem said: ‘The next paragraph is rather interesting:

‘Wayassá ’adu al ássadu ba’adi zálik maal ’nistr, watu’alaq al dufda ’a min aqdamíha . . .’

It means:

‘Then the Eagle shall rejoice with the Lion, and the Frog shall be hung by the feet . . .’

Surely, Gerald, that must refer to the victory of the Allies, and the death of Mussolini, “the Bull-Frog of the Pontine Marshes”. They did hang him up by the feet, you know.’

‘Go on! Go on!’ I pleaded.

Kem went on: ‘The last piece is the most interesting of all, really . . .’

‘Wuyaná’zilu rágoulon la árgoula láhu, bi ’esm báiddáti an’nistr, dúbban láhu alf rigl, wayaatássam al nistru fee aazlátehe, kh’shyata al dúbi kháta yata-zdwaga fee aam . . .’

. . . etcetera, etcetera. This says, in effect:

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'A Man With No Legs shall combat, in the name of the Egg of The Eagle, the Bear With 1,000 Legs. The Eagle shall yearn towards its loneliness for fear of the Bear until, in the 1960th Year, it marries under the Sign of the Winged Lion With The Eagle's Head.

'In this year, the 50th Year of the War of Words, Peace shall come in high Places above burnt earth . . .'

I said: 'Man With No Legs? Surely, that means Franklin D. Roosevelt! Egg of the Eagle? Democracy in America! Yearn towards its loneliness – the old Monroe Doctrine! And fear of the Bear – alarm at communist expansion. But what about the next bit?'

Kem said, with a shrug: 'Well, it would appear to mean that in the year 1960, there will be a great and peaceful world union led by the English-speaking nations . . . Where did you get this remarkable document, Gerald?'

I told him, then, 'Swindle-sheet' Morris's account of the trick he had played on Bohemund Raymond. Kem laughed and said: 'Yes, poor Morris loved a joke. If you don't mind my asking – does it occur to you that he might, perhaps, have been playing a trick on you, Gerald?'

'What, in Arabic?' I said. 'That would have been too subtle for "Swindle-sheet" Morris. Besides, remember, this was before the War, back in 1938.'

• 'Of course,' said Kem, 'I must take into consideration the fact that you, also, are a bit of a joker, and might be playing a trick on me.'

'I give you my word of honour I am not!'

'Well, really,' said Kem, 'all I can say is, that it's very strange . . .' He passed me a piece of paper upon which he had been making notes. 'Here is what you gave me, translated back. It is, unquestionably, pure Arabic. I

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suggest we regard this as a Fleet Street hoax, Gerald; it will be healthier that way.'

And so let it be regarded.

. . . But I wish I knew exactly what Bohemund Raymond, or whatever spirit it was that possessed him, meant exactly by those last two lines . . . We must wait until 1960, and see . . .

The Incorruptible Tailor

'Now too many blessings may be a curse,' said Mr Vara one day while he was pressing my trousers. He worked with an old-fashioned fourteen-pound hand iron with a certain deliberation which has driven nervous men into hysterics.

I once heard a commercial traveller beg Vara please to make it a quick job because he had to catch a train. Vara said: 'There are plenty of trains. Catch another train. Nothing is done in a hurry in Vara's shop.'

To hear him talk with such calm majesty one might imagine that his was one of those cathedral-like establishments to be found in Savile Row. But he has the merest box of a tailor's shop somewhere behind Victoria Station.

He is not much to look at, either: a shrimp of a man, with insignificant features curiously compressed in an expression of ineluctable obstinacy and a head of stiff, grey hair.

'Too many blessings may be a curse,' Vara repeated. 'Children are a blessing and a comfort to a man in his old age. I have seven, so when I want a little peace and quiet to read a book I go to a waiting-room on Victoria Station. A wife is a blessing. I am blessed with one, and she is blessed with ambition. So are all the children. I mean, ambition for me. But I am not ambitious. I am a craftsman, I am, and I won't stoop to ambition in the form of ready-mades and junk. You have met my wife?'

I had. She reminded me of a hornet after a spider is

finished with it – there is nothing left but the sting. But I said: 'Charming woman.'

Vara said: 'Energetic. She has not stopped giving me hell for twenty-five years. And hell can be a blessing; it exercises the will power. If she had been of the yielding type I might have softened.' As it is, I have never given way one inch. Vara dies, but he does not surrender.'

It was difficult not to laugh at this preposterous little fellow, but I asked, with gravity: 'What's the battle?'

'Ah,' he said, 'you are a man of culture. One can talk to you. Have a cup of tea?'

'I should prefer my trousers.'

'Since when do you need trousers to sit down and have a quiet chat?'

'But I have an appointment.'

'In London everybody is always late. And if they are in a hurry, let them wait until their hurry is over.'

Just then a youth came in with a tartan jacket over his arm, which he threw down, saying: 'I want a new zipper on this.'

Vara felt the cloth, rolled the jacket up and calmly tossed it out of the shop. 'Follow it,' said he. The youth was too astounded to do anything but pick up his jacket and go away.

'Sir, I learned my craft with sweat and pain. It is a humble one, but I am the master of it, and the work of these two hands shall not go into such stuff as that. This is what has kept me poor, and for this I have sacrificed my peace at home. "Take what you want," said God, "and pay for it."

'Only two years ago there was a crisis about this, and my wife hit me on the head with a frying-pan. Only a light aluminium frying-pan, but she is very strong for her weight. . . . I wandered into a museum and stood for a

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whole hour, looking at a bronze figure of a sea nymph they had just bought – how beautiful! – and comforted myself, thinking: “Would that sculptor have put so much of his heart and soul into a lump of butter?”

I replied: ‘Canova did. He carved a lion in butter.’

‘Yes. And whoever heard of a lion in butter? And who remembers Canova, that abominable mediocrity?’

‘What is the matter with a slab of butter? If nothing else is available, why not?’

‘I hate discussion,’ said Våra, and so he went on:

I have had some little trouble with my family, especially with the younger ones. My youngest son is a sort of infant prodigy. He reads the basic writings of everybody under the moon. He knows everything and understands nothing.

There is only one cure for this kind of juvenile disease – a bang on the jaw. Underdogs are in and out of my shop day and night; I have no affection for them and still less for their protagonists.

I’ve got a prodigy – two actually: one male and one female. The girl, Elizabeth, is a prodigy in psychology. She has written an essay proving that the abnormal is normal, and vice versa; and all the world is wrong. Not bad for a girl of fifteen, what?

Then my eldest, Frank, he is an inventor of cosmetics. I should hate to tell you what he has cost me in damages; he removed acne from a lady’s face, only part of the face came with it. Cyril, the middle one, wants to take up some madness called sexology, though girl-shy, and has given me lectures that have brought a blush to my face, although, as far back as my great-grandmother could remember, we Varas have always been fecund as codfish.

But I will not bore you with details, except to say that it all costs a mint – a fee here, a fee there – to say nothing

of the fact that landlords need their rent, taxes must be paid, insurance must be attended to, cloth wholesalers require a little on account, a man needs a new pair of glasses.

But if you are ever blessed with a large family, you will notice that things like shoes and socks do not wear out one at a time. The whole lot invariably goes simultaneously. On Sunday, say, everything is all right. Comes Monday morning and you might be the Cratchit family on Christmas Eve; and when you start to think, the gas company is on your doorstep with a final notice, the telephone man arrives to disconnect, the groceries aren't delivered, and always, as Kipling says: 'Boots, boots, boots, boots.'

There was a day a couple of years ago when I had to find a hundred pounds or perish dishonourably.

I opened the shop and put the irons on the fire, and tried to work things out. Nothing came. But then, all of a sudden, a peculiar cheerfulness took hold of me. It does, you know, when you are in despair. Nothing like a good hopelessness to brisk a man up.

So I start to press a pair of riding breeches, when there drives up an opulent motor-car, driven by a chauffeur in green - facecloth - excellent quality - and in comes a big, blonde woman,

I have a predilection for big, blonde women, but this one I could take or leave alone, as the saying goes. Although her entire physique was thrust out, her whole soul was sucked in. You could read it in her mouth and her empty eyes. Yes, she was wearing five thousand pounds' worth of diamonds, and some criminal had made her a hat for five hundred pounds.

She says to me - smelling of perfume that cost twenty guineas an ounce - that she is Mrs X, and I have been

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recommended to her by Mrs Y. She has, says Mrs X, a quantity of cloth from Paris, together with certain patterns, also from Paris, pirated from the *haute couture*. And will I make them up, every stitch by hand?

What is my reaction? I say: 'Let us have a look at the material.'

She calls to the chauffeur and he brings in five costume lengths of stuff and puts them on my counter. At which she slaps the cloth with her paper patterns and asks me: 'How much? I won't pay a penny more than thirty pounds for making this up.'

I gave her a look. I know the type. They boast to high heaven of their husbands' riches, but haggle for pennies like a Petticoat Lane dealer.

They are clever, they are impregnable, they are not to be taken in. They are the easiest persons to be taken in, however, and always come home with bargains. These bargains are generally in the form of jewellery or cloth. They find some delight in believing that they have swindled the downtrodden – who, I may say, live off the fat of the land by letting themselves be swindled.

It pleased me to observe that Mrs X was under the impression that she had got her cloth from Rodier, Dormeuil Brothers and goodness knows who. Whereas she had the most appalling load of ersatz nonsense that ever passed into the hands of a sucker.

She said: 'Make this excellent cloth up according to these exclusive patterns and I will pay you as I've said.'

Now I told you my circumstances, which were not bright, but I said to her: 'Madame, I am a poor man. Yet what I know I know. Here are the eyes and the fingers, but somewhere inside is the soul. The soul will not let the brain and the fingers put their life into rubbish. Because, humble tailor as I am, my life has gone into my work; this

is sacred. It shall not go into such material as this.'

'Fifty pounds,' says this blonde woman.

'Try one thousand pounds and I will still say no,' I say, 'because the devil himself shall not buy the work of these fingers to put it into muck. Take it elsewhere.'

But she only felt that I was holding out for mercenary reasons, and so she said: 'Sixty pounds a costume!'

I said: 'Go to So-and-So along the road, and he will do it for twenty pounds. And now, before you go away, remember that it is only a hyena or a jackal that puts his teeth into rotten stuff. I want your money, but I will not have it. Elsewhere - please go elsewhere. Take your rotten cloth out of my shop. Allow me to help you.'

So, I helped the chauffeur with these lengths of rubbish with which she had been swindled, and I can tell you that she called me quite a few nice names. But that was not the end of that, because my wife - who had come to the shop for grocery money - had been listening.

Being a woman of extraordinary restraint, she had restrained herself during the conversation. She dropped that as soon as the shop door closed. Here we were, she screamed, about to be put into the street to beg.

Here was my numerous family. Here was she, and so ashamed, so terribly ashamed!

I said: 'Ashamed? Woman, you should be ashamed of being ashamed! What? Would you be proud if your husband disgraced himself by putting the good into the bad?'

'And as for the brats, let them shine shoes, let them sell newspapers.'

This last was more than she could bear. She hit me on the head with a broomstick with such force that tears came into my eyes, and ran out of the shop to complain of my cruelty to her sister before going home.

And I can tell you that I felt pretty low. Many another

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man in my state of misery would have taken the easy way out.

The gas was not yet cut off, and a fur-cutting knife is quite as sharp as a razor.

But that is not Vara's style. I simply got angry instead, especially when the landlord came in and reminded me that the rent was considerably overdue, and the postman handed me three letters which even I had not the courage to open, because I was somewhat in debt for cloth and some other items.

I sat down and communed with my soul. Soon a familiar car drives up, and I think to myself: 'If it is that woman again, I am just in the mood.' Then I hesitated, tempted by the devil, and I thought: 'Anything for a little peace and quiet. I will do as she says.' But, praise the Lord, my true spirit revolted, and I said to myself: 'No. Death rather than dishonour.'

I knew what I was going to get when I got home that night, but I steeled myself. However, there got out of the car not the blonde woman but a plump man of middle age, who came into the shop and said: 'You are Vara?'

'I am Mr Vara.'

'I am Mr X.'

'I wish I could congratulate you.'

'I hear you have insulted my wife.'

I said: 'No such luck. How can you insult a person of no sensibility? I merely threw her out of my shop because she wanted me to put good work into bad cloth. That's all.'

Imagine my astonishment when this man begins to laugh, and he says something like this:

'Sir, I honour you for your integrity. My wife thinks she has a shrewd eye for a bargain, and she has been taken in by every smart aleck in Paris and Rome.'

'Mr Vara, you are a man of genius. I never saw a woman so broken in spirit. And yet,' he says, looking about him, 'I imagine that, not being in a large way of business, you couldn't afford to throw away that money?'

'I can't,' I said.

'My tailor,' says he, 'is Tom, Dick and Harry' – excuse me, but I never mention real names – 'in Savile Row, and I pay them a hundred pounds for a suit. I buy ten a year. Now what do you charge?'

I said: 'Not having their overhead, eighty pounds.'

'Get out your patterns and you can make me five, we'll see how they go.'

I said to him: 'They will go. I received my basic training at Schultz's. Schultz was a great man. He once threw King Edward VII out of his shop for criticising the fit of a body coat.'

He said irrelevantly: 'You've heard of me, maybe? My name is X. I'm in the greeting-card line. My office is in Bond Street, and I've got a lot of friends. My recommendation goes a long way. You may not know it, but you did me a kind of favour today. Have a cigar! Now being in a small way of business, you can't give credit. I suggest I pay you in advance.'

And out comes a cheque-book.

So I made him five of the best suits he ever had, and have got a living from him and his friends ever since. So, you see? Here are your trousers. You had better let me make you a couple of suits.

I said: 'As soon as I can afford them. What did you say the man's name was, Mr Vara?'

He said: 'I never mention names. What do you want me to do, stick autographed pictures of my clients in my window? Put up coats-of-arms? I charged Mr X a little extra because he could afford it. But for a man of culture

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I would make a suit for forty pounds.'

'As soon as I get round to it,' I said, putting my trousers on. 'And what did your wife say?'

'For the first time in twenty-five years she said nothing for fifteen minutes. Then she said she had told me so all along and that I was a fool not to have opened an establishment in Savile Row. . . . Well, think it over. Take your time.'

I have been thinking it over and taking my time. But I am somewhat uneasy in my mind. I have met an eminent manufacturer of greeting cards, a plump man. I do not know him well enough to ask the name of his tailor, but he dresses in a peculiarly out-of-date Edwardian style and is the laughing stock of Bond Street.

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About the man called Pilgrim there was a certain air of something gone stale. 'Seedy' is the word for it, as applied to a human being. It was difficult to regard him except as a careful housewife regards a pot of home-made jam upon the surface of which she observes a patch of mildew. 'Sweet but questionable,' she says to herself, 'but it is a pity to waste it. Give it to the poor.' So, as it seemed to me, it was with Pilgrim.

He was curiously appealing to me in what looked like a losing fight against Skid Row, and maintained a haughty reserve when the bar-tender, detaining him as he abstractedly started to stroll out of MacAroon's Grill, said: 'Daddle be a dollar-ten, doc.'

Pilgrim slapped himself on the forehead, and beat himself about the pockets, and cried: 'My wallet! I left it at home.'

'Oh-oh,' the bar-tender said, lifting the counter flap.

Then I said: 'Here's the dollar-ten, Mike. Let the man go.'

But Pilgrim would not go. He took me by the arm, and said in the old-fashioned drawling kind of Oxford accent: 'No, but really, this is too kind! I'm afraid I can't reciprocate. As a fellow limey you will understand. One's position here becomes invidious. You see, I have only just now lost two fortunes, and am in the trough of the wave between the second and the third - which I assure you is not farther off than the middle of next month. I must get to Detroit.

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But allow me to introduce myself by the name by which I prefer to be known: John Pilgrim. Call me Jack. In honesty, I ought to tell you that this is not my real name. If some plague were to wipe out the male members of my family in a certain quarter of Middlesex, in England, I should be addressed very differently; and ride my horses, to boot.

'As matters stand, I am the younger son of a younger son, cast out with a few thousand pounds in my pocket, to make my fortune in Canada.'

I asked: 'Was that your first fortune?'

'Heavens, no! Man on the boat had an infallible system shooting dice. I arrived in Canada, sir, with four dollars and eighteen cents – and my clothes. I roughed it, I assure you. Clerk in a hardware store, dismissed on unjust suspicion of speculation; errand boy at a consulate, kicked out for what they called "shaking down" an applicant for a visa, which was a lie; representative of a wine merchant, wrongly accused of drinking the samples. I went through the mill, I do assure you. And now I am offered a lucrative post in Detroit.'

'Doing what?' I asked.

He said: 'Checking things for a motor company.'

'What things?'

'A word to the wise is sufficient. This is strictly hush-hush. Less said the better, what? But I can put you in the way of a few million dollars if you have time and money to spare.'

'Pray do so,' I said.

'I will. But not being a complete fool I will not be exact in my geography. Do you know Brazil? I know where there is a massive fortune in virgin gold in one of the tributaries of the Amazon. . . . Oh, dear, it really is a bitter fact that men with money who want some more insist on having the

more before they lay out the less! Yet I tell you without the least reserve that I got about ten thousand ounces of pure gold out of the people who live by that river.'

'How did you manage that?' I asked.

Pilgrim smiled at me, and said: 'I dare say you have heard of the tocte nut? No? . . . Well, the tocte nut comes from Ecuador. It is something like an English walnut, only perfectly oval, almost. As in the case of the walnut, the kernel of the tocte nut resembles in its lobes, twists and convolutions, the human brain. It is bitter to eat, and is used generally by children for playing with, as we used to play with marbles.

'Ah, but this is in Ecuador. Go into Brazil, into a certain tributary of the Amazon, and I can show you a place where these nuts – or close relations of theirs – are taken very seriously indeed. The tribesmen do not call them tocte, but tictoc, and only adults play with these nuts in Brazil – for extremely high stakes too. Fortunes – as they are counted in these wild parts – are won or lost on one game with the tictoc nuts.

'The savages having a saying there: "*Tictoc* takes twenty years to learn." To proceed:

From vicissitude to vicissitude is the destiny of the younger son. I could, of course, have written to my elder brother for money. In fact I did. But he didn't answer. In the end, I shipped as cook on a freighter bound for South America. I suspect it was running guns. The crew was composed of the off-scourings of Lapland, Finland, Iceland and San Francisco.

I jumped ship first opportunity, with nothing in my pockets but the papers of an oiler named Martinsen, which I must have picked up by accident, and looked, as one does, for a fellow countryman. Luckily – I have the most astonishing luck – I overheard a man in a bar ordering

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whisky and soda without ice. Blood calls to blood. I was at his elbow in a trice.

He was a huge fellow, and was about to go to the place – which, if you'll forgive me, I won't mention – prospecting for rubies. Desirous of civilised company, he invited me to come along with him – said he would make it worth my while – offered me a share in the profits. He found the equipment, of course: quinine, rifles, trade goods, shot-guns, soap and all that.

His idea was that, the market being good just then, if the worst came to the worst we might make our expenses out of snake skin and alligator hide. His name was Grimes, but he knew a gentleman when he saw one. But he was accident prone. Exploring mud for rubies, Grimes stood on a log to steady himself. The log came to life, opened a pair of jaws, and carried him off – an alligator, of course. They tell me that a mature alligator can, with his jaws, exert a pressure of nearly one thousand pounds' weight. It upset me, I don't mind telling you. Ever since then I have never been able to look at an alligator without disgust. They bring me bad luck.

The following morning I awoke to find my attendants all gone. They had paid themselves in trade goods, leaving me with only what I slept in – pyjamas – plus a rifle, a bandolier of .30-30 cartridges, my papers and some dried beef.

• Goodness only knows what might have happened to me if I had not been rescued by cannibals – and jolly fine fellows they were too. Sportsmen, I assure you. They only ate women past marriageable age. They took me to their chief. I thought I was in a pretty sticky spot, at first, but he gave me some stew to eat – it was monkey, I hope – and while I ate I looked about me. Anyone could see with half an eye that the old gentleman wanted my rifle.

Now I reasoned as follows: I am outnumbered about two hundred and fifty to one by savages armed with spears and poisoned arrows. In the circumstances my rifle must be worse than useless. Better make a virtue of the inevitable and give it to him before he takes it away. Be magnanimous, Jack!

So, expressing delight at the flavour of the stew, I gave him the rifle and the bandolier. He was overwhelmed with joy and gratitude and wanted to know what he could do for me. He offered me girls, more stew, necklaces of human teeth. I conveyed to him that I might prefer a few rubies. Heartbroken, he said that he had none of the red stones, only the green ones, and handed me a fistful of emeralds to the value, conservatively, of a thousand rifles at a hundred and twenty dollars apiece.

I thanked him politely, controlling my emotions as our sort of people are brought up to do. But he mistook my impassive air for disappointment. He was downcast for a moment or two. Then he brightened and said to me: 'Wait. I have something more valuable than stones – something that will make you very rich. It has made me chief. But now I am too old to play. I will give it to you.'

Then he fumbled in what might laughingly be described as his clothes, and produced – guess what – a nut! Upon my word, a common nut, something like a walnut, but smooth and much larger in circumference at one end than at the other. Through years of handling, it had a wonderful patina, like very old bronze.

'You know tictoc?' the old boy asked.

'I know tocte,' I said. 'It is a game played by children in Ecuador.'

'You play?' he asked.

'Never. In Ecuador I have seen it played. In England we call it marbles.'

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'Of these places,' said the chief, 'I have never heard. Here, it is tictoc.'

Then he went on to explain – it took all night – that the tictoc nut was not like other nuts. Everything, said the chief, everything could think a little. Even a leaf had sense enough to turn itself to the light. Even a rat. Even a woman. Sometimes, even a hard-shelled nut. Now when the world was made, the deuce of a long time ago, man having been created, there was a little intelligence left over for distribution. Woman got some. Rats got some. Leaves got some. Insects got some. In short, at last there was very little left.

Then the tictoc bush spoke up and begged: 'A little for us?'

The answer came: 'There are so many of you, and so little left to go around. But justice must be done. One in every ten million of you shall think with a man, and do his bidding. We have spoken.'

So, the old geezer affirmed, the kernel of the tictoc nut came to resemble the human brain. Stroking his great knife, he assured me that he had many times seen one, and the resemblance was uncanny. Superficially, you understand.

To only one tictoc nut in ten million was vouchsafed the gift of thought. And the nuts, being very prolific, grew in the jungles in great profusion. Anyone who could find the ten-millionth nut, the thinking nut, was assured of good fortune, the old savage told me, because this nut would obey its master.

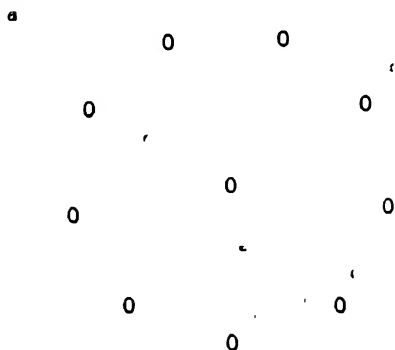
'Now play tictoc,' he said.

I said: 'But I don't know how.'

He did not answer, but led me to a strip of ground stamped flat and level, and polished by innumerable feet. At one end someone had described a circle drawn with

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ochre. In this circle were arranged ten nuts in this pattern:



The object of the game was to knock the ten nuts out of the circle in the fewest possible shots. As a game, I should say that tictoc was much more difficult than pool, pyramids or snooker. You shot from a distance of about seven feet. It was a good player who could clear the circle in five shots; a remarkable one who could do it in four; a superlative one who could do it in three, flipping the oval tictoc nut with a peculiar twist of the thumb.

Several young fellows were playing, but more were betting their very loincloths on the champion, who had recently made a Three.

'Now,' the old codger whispered, 'rub the tictoc between your hands, breathe on it and shout without sound – shout at the back of your mind – telling it what to do. Challenge the champion. Stake your shirt.'

The top of my pyjamas could be no great loss. Furthermore, I had the emeralds, you know. So I took it off and offered my challenge. The young buck felt the cotton and put down against it a necklace of gold nuggets, the largest of which was about as big as a grape.

He played first. On his first shot, out went five. Second,

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out went four. The last was easy. He had scored a Three.

And now it was my turn. Caressing my nut I said to it, without talking: 'Now, old thing, show them what you can do. Try for a One, just to astonish the natives.'

Without much hope, and with no skill at all, I flipped my nut. It seemed to stop half-way, gyrating. Everybody laughed, and my opponent reached for my pyjama top – when, suddenly, my nut kind of shouldered its way forward into the circle, and with something devilishly like careful aim, spun its way into the ten and pushed them, one by one, beyond the bounds of the ring.

You never heard such a shout! I had broken a record. Picking my nut up, I caressed it again and warmed it in my hand.

The chief said: 'This I have never seen. Two, yes. One, no. I know what it is – the markings inside the nut must exactly match the markings of your brain. You are a lucky man.'

Feeling the weight of the necklace I had won, I asked: 'Is there any more stuff like this hereabouts?'

He said no, they didn't regard it especially. The ex-champion had won it downstream, where they picked it out of the river bed and gave it to their women for ornaments. A string of your enemy's teeth meant something. But the yellow stuff was too soft and too heavy. 'If you want it, take your tictoc nut and you can win as much of it as you can carry away – you and ten strong men.'

I promised him that when I came back I would bring more guns and bullets, hatchets, knives, and all his heart could desire, if he would lend me a good canoe and the services of half a dozen sturdy men to paddle it, together with food and water. He agreed, and we took off.

In fine, I cleaned out that village and went on downstream with two war canoes, all loaded with gold and other

valuables, such as garnets, emeralds, etcetera. I should have left it at that. But success had gone to my head.

On the way I stayed the night in the shack of a petty trader, a Portuguese, from whom I bought a whole suit of white-duck clothes, a couple of shirts and pants and some other stuff. 'Your fame has gone before you,' he said, looking enviously at me and then at the gold nuggets I had paid him with. 'They call you the Tictoc Man up and down the river. Now I happen to know that no white man can play tictoc – it takes twenty years to learn. How do you do it?'

I said: 'A mere knack.'

'Well, give me another nugget and I'll give you some good advice. . . . Thank you. My advice is, make straight for the big river, and so to the coast. Don't stop to play at the next village – there is only one – or you may regret it. The Esporco are the most villainous Indians in these parts. Don't push even your luck too far. Four ounces of gold, and I'll let you have a fine weapon, a revolver, all the way from Belgium.'

The revolver I took, but not his advice, and we went on at dawn. In the late afternoon several canoes came out to meet us. My men spat and said: 'Esporco, máster – very bad.'

'What, will they attack us?' I asked.

'No.' They indicated that the Esporco Indian was the worst trickster and cheat in the Mato Grosso. But I fondled the tictoc nut, while observing that in every canoe sat a girl wearing a necklace of raw rubies, and little else. The men – big fellows, as Indians go – had an easy, cosy way with them, all smiles, no weapons, full of good humour. They hailed me as Senhor Tictoc, while the girls threw flowers.

My leading paddler, the stroke as it were, growled:

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'When Esporco bring flowers, keep your hand on your knife'—a savage version of *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*.

Still, I gave orders to land, and was received with wild delight. The chief ordered several young goats killed. I presented him with a sack of salt, which is highly prized thereabout. There was a banquet, with a profusion of some slightly effervescent drink in the nature of the Mexican mescal, only lighter and breezier.

In a little while we started to talk business. I expressed interest in rubies. The chief said: 'Those red things? But they are nothing.' And, taking a magnificent necklace from one of the girls, he tossed it into the river—I was to learn, later, that he had a net there to catch it. 'I have heard that you are interested in stones,' said he, while I gaped like a fish. And he went away and came back with an uncut diamond of the Brazilian variety, as big as your two fists.

I displayed no emotion, but said: 'Interesting. How much do you want for it?'

He said: 'It has no price. I have been around, and know the value your people set on such stones. I also know—we all know on this river—what would happen if the news got about that there was gold, rubies, emeralds and diamonds hereabout. Your people would come down on us like jaguars, and drive us off the face of the earth. As it is, we have enough, we are contented, we regard such stuff as this as pretty for unmarried girls. No, my friend, it is not for sale. But I tell you what. It being a plaything, let us play for it. You have a great reputation as a tictoc player. As it happens, so have I. Now what have you to stake against this stone?'

'Three canoe-loads of treasure,' I said.

At this, one of his sons chimes in with: 'Don't do it,

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Father! The man is a wizard. All the river knows it. He has a thinking nut!

Apparently tipsy, the chief shouted: 'Silence, brat! There is no such thing. It is a superstition! Tictoc is a game of skill, and I am the best man on this river.' He became angry. 'Who questions my skill?'

Nobody did. The circle was made, the ten nuts arranged at their proper distances. I begged my host to shoot first. There was a breathless hush, as he went down on his knees and shot a perfect Two—at which there was a murmur of applause.

Then I stroked my nut and asked it for a One. Out it went, spinning like a little whirlwind, and a One it was.

It is etiquette, in the tictoc game, for the winner to pick up the fighting nuts and bring them back to the base. Loser shoots first. This time the chief shot a Three. I was feeling warm-hearted. Who wouldn't, if he was certain to win a diamond that would make the Koh-i-noor and the Cullinan diamonds look like stones in a fifty-dollar engagement ring?

So I said to my nut: 'This time, for the sport of the thing, get me a Five. But last shot we'll have another One, and the best out of three games.'

It did as it was bid, and I lost with a Five. The chief, much elated, got our nuts and handed me mine with grave courtesy. I shot with perfect confidence. Imagine my horror when, instead of moving with grace and deliberation, it reeled drunkenly forward and barely reached the periphery of the circle! I wondered, could that mescal-like stuff I had drunk have gone to its head through mine? Thinking with all my might, I shot again—and knocked one nut out of the ring. A third time, and I finished with an Eight.

The chief went to pick up our nuts. I was numb with

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grief. He handed me the nut I had played that last game with. I looked at it – and it was not my own!

Then the truth dawned on me. The old rascal had swapped nuts after the second game! Simple as that. But I kept my temper, because in a split second everybody had stopped laughing, and every man had produced a machete, an axe, a bow or a spear.

I said: 'There is some mistake here, sir. This is not my tictoc nut.'

'Then whose is it?'

'Yours. You are, no doubt inadvertently, holding mine in your hand. Give it back, if you please.'

And driven beyond prudence, I made a grab at it. I was fast, but he was faster, and surprisingly strong in the fingers. We stood locked, hand to hand, for about twenty seconds. Then I heard and felt a sharp little crack. So did he, for he stood back, waving away his tribesmen who were closing in.

He held out his hand with dignity; it held the common tictoc nut that he had palmed off on me. In my palm lay my own true nut, but split down the centre, exposing the kernel.

I looked at it, fascinated. You know, I studied medicine once – might be in Harley Street by now, only there was a bureaucratic misunderstanding about four microscopes I borrowed. Silly old asses! I'd have got them out of pawn and put them back where I'd found them, as soon as my remittance came in. But no, they gave me the sack.

However, I had read some anatomy, and I solemnly swear that the kernel of my poor tictoc nut definitely and in detail resembled the human brain – convolutions, lobes, cerebrum, cerebellum, medulla – in every respect.

Most remarkable of all, when I touched it affectionately with my fingertip, it throbbed very faintly, and then lay

still. Whereupon some of the virtue seemed to drain out of me, and I cried like a child.

But I pulled myself together and said: 'Well, the bet is off. The game is null and void. Let me get my men together and push off.'

Then, in the light of torches, I saw bundles on the shore — very familiar bundles.

To save your men unnecessary exertion,' the chief said, 'I had them unload your canoes for you. I wish you no harm, but put it to you that you go quietly back where you belong. Come, you shall not go empty-handed. Take as many small nuggets as your two hands can hold, and depart in peace. You over-reached yourself. I would have given you the diamond for the thinking nut, and gladly, in fair exchange. But no, you had to cheat, to do bad trade, to bet on a sure thing. In this life, nothing is sure.'

I said, holding out the revolver: 'And what will you give me for this?'

'Oh, two double handfuls of gold.'

'May I suggest three?'

'If you will allow me to test it first.'

I did. He fired one shot into the dark. I took the gun back and said: 'First, the gold.'

Down by the river, I took the liberty of scooping up a handful of heavy clay and filling up the barrel of that revolver. It would dry like brick. That old rogue would never play tictoc again.

But in burying the remains of my thinking nut, I had a weird feeling that I was leaving behind a certain essential portion of myself. Gold and jewels I can get again. But that, never.

So I got to the coast and took ship, as a passenger this time, on a heavy freighter bound for Tampa, Florida. What with one thing and another, I arrived with only a

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few nuggets left, which I keep as . . . I don't know, call it keepsakes. You have been very kind to me. Let me give you one—a very little one—and then I must be on my way. Have this one.'

He dropped a heavy gold pellet on the wet table. It was not much larger than a pea, but shaped, or misshapen, beyond human conception. Fire and water had done that.

'Have it made into a tie-pin,' said Pilgrim.

'But I couldn't take a valuable thing like this,' I cried, 'without doing something for you in return!'

'Not a bit of it. We limeys must stick together, and I'm on my way to Detroit. About seven days from now, John Pilgrim, at Detroit's leading hotel, will find me. Help me on my way, if you like, but——' He shrugged.

'I have only ten dollars,' I said, deeply moved by a certain sadness in Pilgrim's eyes. 'You're welcome to that.'

'You're very obliging. It shall be returned with interest.'

'I must go now,' I said.

'So must I,' said he.

Marvelling at the intricacies of the human mind, I walked until I found myself on Sixth Avenue, near West 46th Street, in which area congregate those who, with pitying smiles and a certain kind of shrug, can flaw a diamond carat by carat until you are ashamed to own it, and with a shake of the head depreciate a watch until it stops of its own accord. On impulse I went into a shop there and, putting down Pilgrim's nugget, asked what such a bit of gold might be worth.

His reply was: 'Ya kiddin'? Tickle me so I'll laugh. What's the current price of printer's metal? . . . Worth? Kugel's Kute Novelties sell those twelve for fifty cents, mail order. I can get 'em for ya a dollar for two dozen. A teaspoonful lead, melt it and drop it in cold water. You can honestly advertise "no two alike". Gild 'em, and there's a

nugget. A miniature gold brick. That manufacturer, so he puts out loaded dice "for amusement only"—he salls 'em too. Seriously, did you buy this?"

I said: 'Yes and no.' But as I dropped the nugget into my pocket and turned to go, the shopman said: 'Wait a minute, mister—it's a nice imitation and a good job of plating. Maybe I might give you a couple bucks for it?'

'Oh, no, you won't,' I said, my suspicions aroused. I fondled the nugget in my pocket; it had the indescribable, authentic feel of real gold. As for that trick with melted lead and cold water, I suddenly remembered that I had played it myself about thirty years ago, with some broken toy soldiers, just for the sake of playing with fire. Recently-melted lead has a feel all its own, and is sharp at the edges. But my nugget felt old and worn.

'It could be, after forty years, for once I make a mistake,' the man said. 'Let's have another look.'

But I went out, and visited another shop a few doors away; one of those double-fronted establishments, in the right-hand window of which, under a sign which says OLD GOLD BOUGHT, there lies a mess of pinchbeck bracelets, ancient watch chains, old false teeth and pie-pins. In the other window, diamonds carefully carded and priced at anything between two thousand and fifteen thousand dollars. The proprietor, here, looked as if he were next door but one to the breadline.

I put down my nugget and said boldly: 'How much for this?'

He scrutinised the nugget, put it in a balance and weighed it; then tested it on a jeweller's stone, with several kinds of acid. 'Voigin gold,' he said. 'Where'd you get it?'

'A friend gave it to me.'

'I wish I had such friends.' He called: 'Oiving, come here

River of Riches

a minute,' and a younger man came to his side. 'What d'you make of this?'

Irving said: 'It ain't African gold. It ain't Indian gold. It ain't a California nugget. I say South America.'

'Good boy. Correct.'

'How can you tell?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'You loin,' he said. 'How d'you tell the difference between a Brazilian diamond, an African diamond, an Indian diamond? How d'you tell the difference between salt and sugar? You loin. . . The market value of this little bit vøigin gold is about forty dollars. I got to make a buck — I'll give you thoity-five.'

'Eh?'

" 'Thoity-six, and not a penny more,' he said, counting out the money. 'And if your friend gives you any more, come to me with 'em.'

I took the money, caught a taxi and hurried back to MacAroon's place. The bar-tender was gazing into space.

'That man I was sitting with,' I said, 'where is he?'

The bar-tender, with a sardonic smile, said: 'He put the bite on yqu, huh? I can smell a phony a mile off. I didn't like the look of him as soon as he set foot in my bar. If I was you——'

'Which way did he go?'

'I didn't notice. Soon after you left he ordered a double, no ice, and put down a ten-dollar bill — left me fifty cents, and went out.'

'Here's my telephone number,' I said. 'If he turns up again, call me any hour of the day or night, and hold him till I get here. Here's five dollars on account; another five when you call.'

But Pilgrim never came to MacAroon's again.

I inquired high and low — mostly low — but found no trace of him. A British-sounding man with an insinuating

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air, a malarial complexion and a misleading eccentric manner, who talks about the River Amazon and its tributaries – I will pay a substantial reward for information leading to his rediscovery.

The Oxoxoco Bottle

The fact that the intensely red colour of the glaze on the Oxoxoco Bottle is due to the presence in the clay of certain uranium salts is of no importance. A similar colouration may be found in Bohemian and Venetian glass, for example. No, the archaeologists at the British Museum are baffled by the shape of the thing. They cannot agree about the nature or the purpose.

Dr Raisin, for example, says that it was not designed as a bottle at all, but rather as a musical instrument: a curious combination of the ocarina and the syrinx, because it has three delicately curved slender necks, and immediately below the middle neck, which is the longest, there is something like a finger-hole. But in the opinion of Sir Cecil Sampson, who is a leading authority on ancient musical instruments, the Oxoxoco Bottle was never constructed to throw back sounds. Professor Miller, however, inclines to the belief that the Oxoxoco Bottle is a kind of tobacco pipe: the two shorter necks curve upwards while the longer neck curves downwards to fit mouth and nostrils. Professor Miller indicates that smouldering herbs were dropped in at the 'finger-hole' and that the user of the bottle must have inhaled the smoke through all his respiratory passages.

I have reason to believe that Professor Miller has guessed closest to the truth although, if the document in my possession is genuine, it was not tobacco that they burned in the squid-shaped body of the bottle.

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It was intact, except for a few chips, when I bought it from a mestizo pedlar in Cuernavaca in 1948. 'Genuine,' he said; and this seemed to be the only English word he knew: 'gerquine, genuine.' He pointed towards the mountains and conveyed to me by writhings and convulsions, pointing to earth and sky, that he had picked the bottle up after an earthquake. At last I gave him five pesos for it, and forgot about it until I found it several years later while I was idling over a mass of dusty souvenirs: sombreros, huaraches, a stuffed baby alligator, and other trifles, such as tourists pick up in their wanderings, pay heavily for, and then give away to friends who consign them to some unfrequented part of the house.

The straw hats and other plaited objects had deteriorated. The stitches in the ventral part of the little alligator had given way, and the same had happened to the little Caribbean sting-ray. But the vessel later to be known as the Oxoxoco Bottle seemed to glow. I picked it up carelessly, saying to a friend who was spending that evening with me: 'Now what this is, I don't know——' when it slipped from between my dusty fingers and broke against the base of a brass lamp.

My friend said: 'Some sort of primitive cigar-holder, I imagine. See? There's still a cigar inside it. . . . Or is it a stick of cinnamon?'

'What would they be doing with cinnamon in Mexico?' I asked, picking up this pale brown cylinder. It had a slightly oily texture and retained a certain aromatic odour. 'What would you make of a thing like that?'

He took it from me gingerly, and rustled it at his ear between thumb and forefinger much in the manner of a would-be connoisseur 'listening to' the condition of a cigar. An outer leaf curled back. The interior was pale yellow. He cried: 'Bless my heart, man, it's paper — thin

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paper – and written' on, too, unless my eyes deceive me.'

So we took the pieces of the bottle and that panatella-shaped scroll to the British Museum. Professor Mayhew, of Ceramics, took charge of the broken bottle, Dr Wills, of Ancient Manuscripts, went to work on the scroll with all the frenzied patience characteristic of such men, who will hunch their backs and go blind working twenty years on a fragment of Dead Sea scroll.

Oddly enough, he had this paper cigar unrolled and separated into leaves within six weeks, when he communicated with me, saying: 'This is not an ancient manuscript. It is scarcely fifty years old. It was written in pencil, upon faint-ruled paper torn out of some reporter's notebook not later than 1914. This is not my pigeon. So I gave it to Brownlow, of Modern Manuscripts. Excuse me.' And he disappeared through a book-lined door in the library.

Dr Brownlow had the papers on his table, covered with a heavy sheet of plate-glass. He said to me, in a dry voice: 'If this is a hoax, Mr Kersh, I could recommend more profitable ways of expending the Museum's time and your own. If this is not a hoax, then it is one of the literary discoveries of the century. The Americans would be especially interested in it. They could afford to buy it, being millionaires. We could not. But it is curious, most curious.'

'What is it?' I asked.

He took his time, in the maddening manner of such men, and said: 'Considering the advanced age of the putative author of this narrative, there are certain discrepancies in the handwriting. The purported author of this must have been a very old man in about 1914, at which I place the date of its writing. Furthermore, he suffered with asthma and rheumatism. Yet I don't know. If you

will allow me to make certain inquiries, and keep this holograph a few days more . . . ?'

I demanded: 'What man? What rheumatism? What do you mean?'

He said: 'Beg pardon, I thought you knew. This —' and he tapped the plate-glass — 'pretends to be the last written work of the American author, Ambrose Bierce. I have taken the liberty of having it photographed for your benefit. If we may keep this until next Monday or so for further investigation . . . ?'

'Do that,' I said, and took from him a packet of photographs, considerably enlarged from the narrow notebook sheets.

'He was a great writer!' I said. 'One of America's greatest.'

The Modern Manuscripts man shrugged. 'Well, well. He was in London from 1872 to 1876. A newspaperman, a newspaperman. They used to call him "Bitter" Bierce. When he went back to America he worked — if my memory does not deceive me — mainly in San Francisco; wrote for such publications as *The Examiner*, *The American*, *Cosmopolitan*, and suchlike. Famous for his bitter tongue and his ghostly stories. He had merit. Academic circles in the United States will give you anything you like for this — if it is genuine. If . . . now I beg you to excuse me.' Before we parted, he added, with a little smile: 'I hope it is genuine, for your sake and ours — because that would certainly clear up what is getting to be a warm dispute among our fellows in the Broken Crockery Department . . .'

And here is the manuscript found in the Oxoxoco Bottle:

Mount Popocatepetl looms over little Oxoxoco which, at first glance, is a charming and picturesque village, in

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the Mexican sense of the term. In this respect it closely resembles its human counterparts. Oxoxoco is picturesque and interesting, indeed; at a suitable distance, and beyond the range of one's nostrils. Having become acquainted with it, the disillusioned traveller looks to the snowy peak of the volcano for a glimpse of cool beauty in this lazy, bandit-haunted, burnt-up land. But if he is a man of sensibility, he almost hopes that the vapours on the peak may give place to some stupendous eructation of burning gas, and a consequent eruption of molten lava which, hissing down into the valley, may cauterise this ulcer of a place from the surface of the tormented earth, covering all traces of it with a neat poultice of pumice stone and a barber's dusting of the finest white ashes.

They used to call me a good hater. This used to be so. I despised my contemporaries, I detested my wife – a feeling she reciprocated – and had an impatient contempt for my sons; and for their grandfather, my father. London appalled me, New York disgusted me, and California nauseated me. I almost believe that I came to Mexico for something fresh to hate. Oxco, Taxco, Cuernavaca – they were all equally distasteful to me, and I knew that I should feel similarly about the (from a distance enchanting) village of Oxoxoco. But I was sick and tired, hunted and alone, and I needed repose, because every bone in my body, at every movement, raised its sepulchral protest. But there was to be no rest for me in Oxoxoco.

Once the traveller sets foot in this village, he is affronted by filth and lethargy. The men squat, chin on knee, smoking or sleeping. There is a curious lifelessness about the place as it clings, a conglomeration of hovels, to the upland slope. There is only one half-solid building in Oxoxoco, which is the church. My views on religion are tolerably well known, but I made my way to this edifice

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to be away from the heat, the flies, and the vultures which are the street cleaners of Oxocho. (In this respect it is not unlike certain other cities I have visited, only in Oxocho the vultures have wings and no politics.) The church was comparatively cool. Resting, I looked at the painted murals. They simply christen the old bloody Aztec gods and goddesses – give them the names of saints – and go on worshipping in the old savage style.

A priest came out to greet me. He radiated benevolence when he saw that I was wearing a complete suit of clothes, a watch-chain, and boots, however down at heel. In reply to his polite inquiry as to what he could do for me, I said: 'Why, padre, you can direct me out of this charming village of yours, if you will.' Knowing that nothing is to be got without ready cash, I gave him half a dollar, saying: 'For the poor of your parish – if there are any poor in so delightful a place. If not, burn a few candles for those who have recently died of want. Meanwhile, if you will be so good as to direct me to some place where I can find something to eat and drink, I shall be infinitely obliged.'

'Diego's widow is clean and obliging,' said he, looking at my coin. Then: 'You are an American?'

'I have that honour.'

'Then you will, indeed, be well advised to move away from here as soon as you have refreshed yourself, because there is a rumour that Zapata is coming – or it may be Villa – what do I know?'

'Presumably, the secrets of the Infinite, padre, judging by your cassock. Certainly,' I said, 'the secrets of Oxocho. Now, may I eat and drink and go on my way?'

'I will take you to Diego's widow,' said he, with a sigh. 'Up there,' said he, pointing to the mountain slope, 'you will certainly be safe from Villa, Zapata, and any other man in these parts. No one will go where I am pointing,

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señor — not the bravest of the brave. They are a superstitious people, my people.'

'Not being superstitious yourself, padre, no doubt you have travelled that path yourself?'

Crossing himself, he said: 'Heaven forbid!' and hastily added: 'But you cannot go on foot, *señor*?'

'I'd rather not, padre. But how else should I go?'

His eyes grew bright as he replied: 'As luck will have it, Diego's widow has a *burro* to sell, and *he* knows the way anywhere. Come with me and I will take you to Diego's widow. She is a virtuous woman, and lives two paces from here.'

The sun seemed to flare like oil, and at every step we were beset by clouds of flies which appeared not to bother the good priest who seemed inordinately concerned with my welfare. His 'two paces' were more like a thousand, and all the way he catechized me, only partly inspired (I believe) by personal curiosity.

'*Señor*, why do you want to go up *there*? True, you will be safe from bad men. But there are other dangers, of which Man is the least.'

'If you mean snakes, or what not——' I began.

'— Oh no,' said he, 'up *there* is too high for the reptiles and the cats. I see, in any case, that you carry a pistol and a gun. Oh, you will see enough snakes and cats when you pass through the Oxoxoco jungle on your way. That, too, is dangerous; it is unfit for human habitation.'

'Padre,' said I, 'I have lived in London.'

Without getting the gist or the point of this, he persisted: 'It is my duty to warn you, *señor* — it is very bad jungle.'

'Padre, I come from San Francisco.'

'But *señor*! It is not so much the wild beasts as the insects that creep into the eyes, *señor*, into the ears. They

suck blood, they breed fever, they drive men mad——'

'—Padre, padre, I have been connected with contributors to the popular press!'

'Beyond the second bend in the river there are still surviving, un¹baptized, certain Indians. They murder strangers slowly, over a slow fire, inch by inch——'

'—Enough, padre; I have been married and have had a family.'

His pace lagged as we approached the house of Diego's widow, and he asked me: 'Do you understand the nature of a *burro*, a donkey?'

'Padre, I attended the Kentucky Military Institute.'

'I do not grasp your meaning, but they are perverse animals, bless them. Tell them to advance, and they halt. Urge them forward, they go sideways.'

'Padre, I was drummer-boy with the Ninth Indiana Infantry.'

'Ah well, you will have your way. Here is Diego's widow's house. She is a good woman.' And so he led me into a most malodorous darkness, redolent of pigs with an undertone of goat.

The widow of Diego, as the padre had said, was unquestionably a good woman, and a virtuous one. With her looks, how could she have been other than virtuous? She had only three teeth, and was prematurely aged, like all the women hereabout. As for her cleanliness, no doubt she was as clean as it is possible to be in Oxoxoco. A little pig ran between us as we entered. The padre dismissed it with a blessing, and a hard kick, and said: 'Here is a gentleman, my daughter, who requires refreshment and wants a *burro*. He is, of course, willing to pay.'

'There is no need of that,' said the widow of Diego, holding out a cupped hand. When I put a few small pieces of money into her palm she made them disappear like a

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prestidigitator, all the while protesting: 'I could not possibly accept,' etcetera, and led me to a pallet of raw-hide strips where I sat, nursing my aching head.

Soon she brought me a dish of enchiladas and a little bottle of some spirits these people distil, at a certain season, from the cactus. I ate – although I knew that the hot, red pepper could not agree with my asthma; and drank a little, although I was aware that this stuff might be the worst thing in the world for my rheumatism. The flies were so numerous and the air so dense and hot that I felt as one might feel who has been baked in an immense currant bun, without the spice. She gave me a gourd of goat's milk and, as I drank it, asked me: 'The *señor* wants a *burro*? I have a *burro*.'

'So the reverend father told me,' said I, 'and I hear no good of him.'

'I have never seen such a *burro*,' said she. 'He is big and beautiful – you will see for yourself – almost as big as a mule, and all white. You can have him for next to nothing. Five silver dollars.'

'Come now,' said I, 'what's wrong with this animal that has all the virtues in the world and goes for next to nothing? I have lived a very long time in all parts of the world, *señora*, and one thing I have learned – never trust a bargain. Speak up, what's the matter with the beast? Is he vicious?'

• 'No, *señor*, he is not vicious, but the good people in Oxoxoco are afraid of him, and nobody will buy him. They called him a ghost *burro*, because his hair is white and his eyes and nose are red.'

'In other words, an albino donkey,' I remarked.

At the unfamiliar word, she crossed herself and continued: ' . . . And what need have I for a *burro*, *señor*? A few goats, a pig or two, a little corn – what more do I

want? Come, *caballero*, you may have him for four dollars, with a halter and a blanket thrown in.'

'Well, let me see this famous *burro*, widow. I have ridden many a ghost in my time, and have been ridden by them in my turn.'

So she led me to a shady place near-by where stood a large white donkey, or *burro* as they call them, haltered, still, and seemingly contemplative. 'Where did you get him?' I asked.

The question seemed to embarrass her, but she replied: 'He strayed from up *there* –' pointing to the mountain – and since no one has claimed him in three years I have the right to call him mine.'

'Well,' said I, 'I am going up there. No doubt someone will recognise him and claim him, and I'll be short one donkey. But give me the blanket and the halter, and I will give you three dollars for the lot.'

Diego's widow agreed readily. I could see what was passing in her mind: the *burro* was economically valueless, and if Villa broke through, which seemed likely, his commissariat would take the donkey away to carry ammunition or, perhaps, to eat. She could not hide a donkey, but she could hide three dollars. Hence, she produced an old Indian blanket and a raw-hide halter. Also, she filled my canteen with water and offered me a stirrup-cup of mescal, and pressed into my pockets some cakes wrapped in leaves. '*Vaya con Dios*,' stranger,' she said, 'go with God. When you pass the bend in the river and find yourself in the jungle, look to your rifle. But where the path forks, where the trees get thin, *turn left, not right*.' Then she threw over my head a little silver chain, attached to which was a small silver crucifix. I felt somewhat like the man in young Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (which might have been an excellent novel if he could have kept up to the quality of the

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first three or four chapters) but I thanked her, and offered her another dollar which she refused. Perhaps, after all, she really was a good woman, as the priest had said?

The inhabitants of Oxoxoco came out of their divers lethargies to cross themselves as I passed, mounted on the white *burro*. But soon I was in the jungle, following a barely perceptible path up the mountain.

I detest the indiscriminately growing, perpetually breeding, constantly rotting, useless and diseased life of the jungle. It reminds me too much of life in the poorer quarters of such great cities as London and New York. Jungles – whether vegetable or of brick-and-mortar – are to hide in, not to live in. Where there is too much life there is too much death and decay. The Oxoxoco jungle was full of useless forms of life. The trees grew to an immense height, racing neck for neck to the sunlight; meeting overhead and grappling with one another, branch to branch, locked in a stranglehold, careless of the murderous vines that were twining themselves about their trunks and sucking their life-sap while they struggled. There was no light, but there was no shade; only a kind of evil steam. In places, I thought I would have to cut my way with my machete, but the donkey seemed to know his way through what, to me, seemed hopelessly impenetrable places. He paused, sometimes, to drink out of some little pool or puddle that had dripped from the foliage above. But he went on very bravely. I never spent three dollars on a better bargain, and wished now that I had not haggled with Diego's widow who, I was by now convinced, was not merely a virtuous woman but a generous one. Or a fool. And I had reason to bless her forethought in filling my canteen with water and my pocket with cakes, because three laborious days passed before the air became sweeter and the vegetation more sparse.

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But long before we got out of the jungle I heard myself talking to myself, saying: 'So, you old fool, you have got what you deserve. Live alone, die alone . . .' There being no 'unlicked' journalists to puncture with my tongue, I turned it against myself; and I believe that at last I met my match in piercing acrimony, because I was tongue-tied against my own onslaughts.

Then, having drunk the last drop of my water (which immediately sprang out again through the pores of my skin) I gave myself up for lost and started to become delirious. I thought that I was back in the log cabin in which I was born in Meigs County, Ohio, with my poor crazy father and my eight brothers and sisters . . . and I had made up my mind to run away . . .

Then, miraculously, there were no more trees, and the air was clean and cold. The white *burro* broke into a gallop, then a trot, then a walk, and so came to a halt. I raised my drooping head and saw, standing in our path, a tall, lean man dressed all in white, holding up a hand in an imperious gesture. He said, in a sonorous voice: 'So, you bad *burro*, you have come home? Well, I will forgive your going astray since you have brought us a guest.' Then, to me, in pure Castilian: 'Allow me to help you to dismount, *señor*. I fear you are exhausted, and your face is badly scratched by the thorns.'

I managed to croak, in English: 'For God's sake, water!'

Mine was the semi-imbecile astonishment of the helplessly played-out man when I heard him reply in perfect English: 'Of course, sir. I am extremely thoughtless.' I suppose he made some gesture, because two men lifted me, very gently, and put me in a shady place, while the gentleman in white held to my lips a vessel – not a gourd, but a metal vessel – of pure ice-cold water, admonishing me to drink it slowly.

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It revived me wonderfully, and I said: 'Sir, you have saved my life, and I am grateful to you — not for that, but for the most delicious drink I have ever tasted.' Then my eyes fell upon the cup from which I had drunk. The outside was frosted, like a julep-cup, but the inside was not. Then I noticed the colour and the weight of it. It was solid gold.

A servant refilled it from a golden ewer and I drained it again. The gentleman in the white suit said: 'Yes, it is very good water. It comes unadulterated from the snows, which are unpolluted. But your voice is familiar to me.'

I was travelling incognito, but in courtesy I had to give my host some name to call me by, so I said: 'My name is Mark Harte——' borrowing from two of my contemporaries the Christian name of one and the surname of the other. Then I fainted, but before I quite lost consciousness I heard the gentleman in the white suit utter some words in a strange language and felt myself, as it were, floating away. I know that somebody put to my lips a cup of some bitter-tasting effervescent liquid. Then, curiously happy, I fell into oblivion as lightly as a snow-flake falls upon black velvet.

It was one of those sleeps that might last an hour or ten thousand years. When I awoke I was lying on a bed of the most exquisite softness, in a cool and spacious chamber simply but luxuriously furnished in a style with which I was unacquainted. My only covering was a white wrapper, or dressing-gown, of some soft fabric like cashmere. There was a kind of dressing-table near the window upon which stood a row of crystal bottles with gold stoppers containing what I presumed to be perfumes and lotions. Above the dressing-table hung a large bevelled mirror in a golden

frame, wonderfully wrought in designs which seemed at once strange and familiar. My face, in the mirror, was miserably familiar. But my month-old beard was gone. Only my moustache remained; and my hair had been trimmed and dressed exactly as it was before I left San Francisco and came to Mexico to die. There were bookshelves, also, well filled with a variety of volumes. With a shock of surprise — almost of dismay — I recognised some works of my own. Upon a low table near the bed stood a golden ewer and cup, and a little golden bell. This last named I picked up and rang. The door opened and two servants came in carrying between them a table covered with a damask cloth and laid with a variety of dishes, every dish of gold with a gold cover. One of them placed a chair. Another unfolded a snowy napkin which he laid across my knees as I sat. Then he proceeded to lift the covers, while the other brought in a wine-cooler of some rich dark wood curiously inlaid in gold with designs similar to those in the frame of the mirror. Everything but the wine-glasses was of massive gold; and these were of crystal, that beautiful Mexican rock crystal. I picked up a champagne glass and observed that it had been carved out of one piece, as had the hock of glass, claret glass, port-wine glass, and liqueur glass, etcetera. Many months of patient, untiring, and wonderfully skilful craftsmanship must have gone into the making of every piece. Gold never meant much to me, except when I needed it; and such a profusion of it tended even more to debase that metal in my currency. But those wine-glasses, carved and ground out of the living crystal — they fascinated me.

While I was admiring them, I touched a goblet with a tentative fingernail and was enjoying its melodious vibrations when the *sommelier*, the wine waiter, went out on tiptoe and returned, wheeling a three-tiered wagon, upon

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every shelf of which was ranged a number of rare wines of the choicest vintages. It seems that I had touched a sherry glass; in any case he filled the glass I had touched from an old squat bottle. 'Hold hard, my friend,' I said, in Spanish. But he only bowed low and made a graceful gesture towards the glass. I believe that that sherry was in the hogs-head before Napoleon came to hand-grips with the Duke of Wellington at Badajoz. Sherry is the worst thing in the world for rheumatism, and I meant to take no more than one sip. But that one sip filled me so full of sunlight that I felt myself responding to it as if to Spanish music, and my appetite came roaring back. I ate as I had never eaten before: With each course came an appropriate wine. At last I was served with coffee and brandy. The table was removed. In its place they brought in a low round table, inlaid like the wine-cooler, and upon a great gold tray, crystal glasses, a decanter, and all that goes with a Sèvres coffee-pot.

Now my host came in, and I had an opportunity to observe him more closely. 'I trust that you have refreshed yourself, Mr Harte,' said he.

I replied: 'My dear sir, it is you who have refreshed me. Never have I, in my wildest dreams, imagined such helio-gabalian hospitality. I do not know how to thank you.'

He replied: 'You thank me by your presence. You reward me, Mr Mark Harte. Let us take coffee and cognac together. I hope you slept well. I thought that it might please you, when you awoke, to find yourself looking a little more like the gentleman whose conversation I – inadvertently but with vast pleasure – happened to overhear in the Imperial Café in London, in the spring of 1873; and later at the Ambassador, not many years ago. But do taste this brandy. It was distilled, I think, about the time when Napoleon was a cadet –

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*Napoleon with his stockings half down
Is in love with Giannaconnetta . . .*

— You heard the jingle? Yes, Mr Harte, the wine merchants speak of "Napoleon Brandy", but I possess the last few dozen authentic bottles in the world.'

'You have been so kind to me,' said I, 'that I feel bound to tell you: my name is not Mark Harte.'

'Oh, but I knew that two days ago — yes, you slept forty-eight hours — and I was quite aware that you were neither Mark Twain, nor Bret Harte, nor any imaginable combination of the two. You are Mr Ambrose Bierce and, to be frank with you, I would rather have you under my roof than the other two put together.'

Always of an irritable turn, though somewhat mellowed by deep rest, good food and fine wine, I repeated what I must have said elsewhere a thousand times before: that Bret Harte was a cheap slangy upstart who had wheedled his way; and that Sam Clemens (Mark Twain) was better, but not much, or he would never have written such a puerile work as *Huckleberry Finn*.

I drew a deep breath, whereupon one of my asthmatic attacks took hold of me. An asthmatic should know better than to draw a deep breath too suddenly, even when he is about to launch a diatribe against his rivals. A certain mockery pervades such occasions. You need at least two good lungsful of air to blow up the epigram, which is, of course, the most brilliant thing that ever came to the tip of your tongue. Then your respiratory tracts close as surely as if a Turk had a bow-string about your throat, and the air you have inhaled refuses to come out. Suddenly, you develop the chest of a blacksmith and the complexion of a general. It is at once the most ridiculous and the most wretched of maladies torturing as it does sufferer and by-

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stander alike. My host rang the little golden bell and in a moment an old woman came in.

He said to her three or four words in that unknown tongue which I had heard before, and she darted away to return with a most curious bottle with three necks, a small gallipot, and a vessel of boiling water. The contents of the gallipot she poured into a hole in the body of the bottle and added what I presume to be boiling water. Then, inserting two of the necks of the bottle into my nostrils and the middle neck between my lips, she applied her own to the hole in the body of the bottle and steadily blew. I was first aware of something disagreeably pungent. Then the pungency became pleasurable. She withdrew the bottle and I found myself breathing, with a most charming sense of peace.

But my witticisms had been completely driven out of my mind.

'It is only asthma,' my host said, in his powerful but gentle voice. 'We can cure you of that, Mr Bierce.'

'Thank you, sir, thank you,' I said. I was about to add that, with such a formula, he might make his fortune in the north, but I remembered that profusion of pure gold and said, instead: 'It was that, that drove me here – that, and rheumatism. I thought that the hot, high, dry air . . .'

My host said, in his gentle voice: 'Indeed, yes, Mr Ambrose Bierce. You are right, as usual – and, as usual, somewhat wrong. Remember your story entitled *The Damned Thing* in which you indicate that there are sounds inaudible to the human ear and colours invisible to the human eye. If my memory does not deceive me, you concluded with the words: "God help me, the Damned Thing is of such a colour!" Correct me if I am wrong. Listen, Mr Bierce – up here we can hear the high and the low, the squeak of the bat and the rumblings under the earth; and

we know, 'believe me, we *know*.' His eyes were like coals, but his face was bland as he said: 'What do you know, Mr Ambrose Bierce? . . . Let us change the subject. Tell me of your experiences in the Oxoxoco jungle. Were you troubled?'

'Excepting hunger and thirst,' I said, 'not a bit. Once or twice I thought I saw some red-brown faces peering at me, but then they disappeared almost as if they were afraid of me.'

My host laughed, and said: 'Do forgive me, Mr Bierce. Those savages were not afraid of you, they were afraid of Tonto.'

'I thought it might be my guns that frightened them, sir. But who is Tonto?'

'Tonto is a Spanish word meaning: silly, irresponsible, stupid. It is the name of the *burro* upon which you rode here – and for bringing you I will forgive all that perverse donkey's sins. Allow me to assure you, however, that if you had been riding any ordinary ass, both you and it, by now, would have been butchered, eaten, and forgotten. Thank Tonto. When those jungle beasts see one of my white *burros* – and they know them, the dogs – they hide their heads.' Then he mused, 'Tonto was always a curiously rebellious animal. That is why we call him Tonto. Cross-grained. A donkey is not called a donkey without reason, sir.' He laughed. 'It would be no use beating him even if I were so disposed. One must earn the affection of a donkey or a mule; otherwise they will stand and be beaten to death rather than take an order. Not that I have ever beaten beast or man. We are humane here, sir, and loathe violence. Mr Bierce, sir, let it be quite plain that you do here as you will.'

'I like that donkey, or *burro*,' said I. 'Somehow I find him sympathetic.'

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'Then he is yours,' said my host.

After some interchange of courtesies, I said; 'Here is something I do not understand, sir: you live here in the wilds, near a jungle inhabited by savages. Yet you live in a magnificent stone house, attended by servants who would be worth their weight in gold even in Mexico City. I speak of gold – you eat off gold platters, drink out of gold cups or glasses of pure rock crystal. You are an accomplished man; you speak several languages with remarkable purity. This, I do not understand.'

'Mr Bierce, I am the head of a very ancient family, indeed – possibly the most ancient family extant upon the face of the earth. No, wait! I see, springing to your lips, an inquiry unworthy of you, which would not do justice to me. Did I come over with the Conquistadores? Were my predecessors with Cortez? The answer is, no. Then you will ask whether my forebears, the ancient Aztecs, came up here to escape from the Spaniards and their horses. Sir, you may believe me when I tell you that the Aztecs were mere upstarts by my family reckoning. The very house in which I have the honour of sheltering you is almost as old as the pyramids in Yucatan. Do not speak to me, sir, of the Aztecs – without entering into the detail, they were a foolish people though numerous. My people were kings, sir, before the Aztecs crept out of the jungle. The little they knew of architecture, carving, and so forth, they derived from us. You have seen the Yucatan pyramids? Have you ever seen anything so crude? The Aztec carvings? Put your fingers in the corners of your mouth, pull, and roll your eyes. They are out of drawing, too, if you observe the limbs. . . .

'Now this house is made of volcanic rock – fused by the fires that die not – cut in cubes, mathematically precise, each side of the cube as long as my stride, which is about thirty-two inches. No baking, no plastering. It is not a

house (humble though it may seem to you), it is an ancient jewel. The pyramids of Egypt themselves would, on analysis, look foolish beside this little house. . . . Now you will ask me about gold, etcetera. Sir, Mr Bierce, we have almost inexhaustible funds of gold, and take it for granted. In effect, we of the Old People scarcely regard it except as a medium of exchange . . . and for certain other purposes. Personally, for utility, I prefer silver. Silver, I find, is lighter and more agreeable. And while I drink out of crystal — my men grind it to its proper proportions with wet sand, as the Chinese shape jade — I prefer a mixture of silver, gold and copper for my dishes. This is firmer than tedious gold. I would like to make an admixture with tin, which might be a very good thing. But I bore you.'

'I assure you, not in the least, sir,' I said. 'I was only about to remark that you seem to have travelled greatly. You say that you have seen me in London, in San Francisco, and so forth——'

'— Why not, Mr Bierce? Necessarily so, sir. You may have observed that we live, here, in something of a civilised way. You took (and I hope you enjoyed it) champagne, for example, with your meal. Where does it come from? Necessarily, France. How do I get it? Very simple; I exchange gold, of which I have an immense supply. There you have it.'

'But, my dear sir, you are a man of the world. It seems to me,' said I, 'that you speak every language fluently — even including languages I have never heard spoken.'

'Oh, I move, here and there as necessity dictates. But this is my home. Not only do I speak languages, Mr Bierce — I speak accents and dialects.' Then he made a chewing motion with his jaws, let the right-hand side of his mouth droop loosely, and spoke in the accents of a Calaveres pros-

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pector and pretended to spit as he said: 'Mr Ambrose Bierce, sir! Me and my folks sure would admire to have you for supper!'

I replied, in the same intonation: 'Yes sir, you bet!'

We shook hands in the California style. His handshake was exploratory – he seemed to be feeling my hand joint by joint. Said he: 'But we were speaking of rheumatism. We can first alleviate, then cure, that. Nothing simpler, if you overcome your modesty.'

'My modesty apart,' said I, 'what is your process?'

My host said: 'There are two processes. The preliminary process is a form of massage. You have been massaged, no doubt, by shampooers in Turkish baths and Hummums in various cities. But only by ten fingers. Now my masseuses have seventy fingers. That is to say, there are seven of them. Each takes a joint, a muscle, or a place where certain nerves cross. The seven women – I am sorry, but only women can do it – work at the same time, in perfect co-ordination. They were trained from childhood, bred to the business. They will prepare you for the second treatment, which is sonic.'

'Sonic?' That, sir, should pertain to *sound*.'

'Just so, Mr Bierce. My masseuses will prepare you for the sound treatment that will take away the crystals that come between certain joints and fibres, and make you uncomfortable. With all your perspicacity you do not understand? Here, I'll demonstrate.'

This extraordinary man now picked up a crystal water glass, and threw it down. It bounced – while I winced – and rocked itself still, undamaged. He picked it up and set it on the low table, saying: 'To all intents and purposes, Mr Bierce, apart from a sudden shock this crystal is indestructible. But observe me closely.' While I watched, he rang the glass with a fingernail. It gave out a gloriously

melodious note, somewhere in the scale of *D* major. He listened intently; then, filling his lungs, which were the enormous lungs of the man who lives in the rarefied air of the uplands, he sang into the glass precisely the same note as it had sounded. Only that one note, and he sang it with tremendous volume and power. The glass quivered, appeared to dance – ‘then suddenly burst asunder, fell to pieces.

He said: ‘One must take into consideration the natural cohesion of particles. The particles, or atoms, of all matter, living or dead, are obedient to certain natural laws of cohesion. They respond to their own vibrations, Mr Bierce. By means of sound, and sound alone, I could – for example – have made that glass very light or very heavy. And when you are relaxed, almost inert, I will find the right vibration and, by the proper application of sound, I will break the tiny nodules and disperse the antagonistic acids that cause you so much pain . . . with your permission, let it be understood – not without your permission.’

‘If you can rid me, sir, of these aches and pains as you have rid me of this asthmatic attack, you have my permission to do anything.’

He rang the little golden bell. A manservant came in, immediately, to whom he gave an order in that tantalisingly familiar yet utterly foreign tongue of the household. Then he said to me, in his impeccable English: ‘I must ask you, if you will be so kind, to remove your robe. I may say, by the bye, that the clothes in which you came have been cleaned and mended, so that they are as good as new; your boots likewise. They are in the cupboard by the door, together with your gun, your revolver, and your machete. Understand me: it is my desire that you be perfectly content. You have only to express a wish and it will be granted. . . . You may think this odd, Mr Bierce?’

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'Delightfully so,' I said.

'Yes, by common standards it is. But I am of the Old People, and we live by the spirit of the great. I have sent out messages, north, south, east and west, to my scattered family. They will assemble here in a month, and then——'

But then eight women came into the room. An anthropologist would have been hard put to it to define their race. Presumably their heads had been bound at birth, because their skulls were curiously conical. Their faces were of the neutral colour of weak coffee, and quite expressionless. While I lay on the bed, seven of them took positions around me. The eighth carried a golden bowl of some kind of aromatic oil, which she offered to the others who steeped their hands in it.

Then began the massage as my host had explained it – inch by inch, line by line, nerve by nerve and muscle by muscle – seventy skilled fingers working in perfect co-ordination. There used to be a masseur with a red beard in the Turkish bath at Covent Garden whom I regarded as a master of his profession. He could take away indigestion, muscular pains, or a headache simply by the application of his supple and intelligent hands. His name was Jim. Any one of these seven women was worth ten Jims. I had been tolerably comfortable before they went to work. But they brought to me a sense of tranquillity of which I should never have thought myself capable.

I fell asleep while they were still working. How long they worked I do not know, but the sun was setting when I awoke, and I was hungry and thirsty again. I rang my little bell and the two men who had previously attended me, came in again, this time with a larger table which they set for two. Now, my host dined with me, anticipating my every want. 'With this meal,' he explained, 'you may

eat only white meats – merely poultry of various sorts, unborn veal, fish, omelettes, etcetera. Hence, only white wine. Because, after an hour for digestion and a good cigar, you must come with me and we will complete the treatment. There will be no more rheumatism, no more arthritis, no more gout. Believe me, Mr Bierce, we live by the spirit here and once purged of pain and hate, relieved of the necessity to earn a living, yours is the greatest spirit of the age and I want you to become one of us. We will make you perfect.'

It was in my heart to say that I did not want to be perfect; that perfection is for saints and gods, and I had no ambition in that direction; for they used to call me 'Bitter' Bierce, not without reason. Certain souls thrive on bitter fruit; only fools love sugar, only madmen hope for perfection. But I was too comfortable to argue the point, and my host had been somewhat more than kind to me. I may have been born a farmer's boy, but I have some of the instincts of a gentleman.

'A cigar, if you will, but no brandy until later. Then, anything you like. Later, nothing will hurt you, Mr Bierce. I have had a steer killed, and the *filet* hung; likewise a five-year-old sheep, well fed, well penned, well killed – we shall eat the saddle . . .'

So, eventually, having dressed me in a suit similar to his own, he led me through a labyrinth of corridors, down and down from door to door, into the bowels of the mountain, and there we came into a great cave. One might put St Paul's Cathedral in London, entire, into the dome of St Peter's in Rome; but St Peter's itself might have been lost in the vastness of that cave. It was occupied by something, the sight of which impelled me to ask: 'Is this an organ, sir?'

'An organ, of a kind,' said my host, 'but of such a kind

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that I venture to say that its like will never be seen again. I suppose you know that the Indians in Yucatan, etcetera, have what they call "water-pipes". These are a series of pottery jars of varying sizes, to the tops of which are attached a certain kind of whistle. By means of a primitive sort of spigot they regulate a flow of water into the largest jar, first of all. The water, rising, compresses the air which, being forced out through the whistle, makes a certain sound – what time the water, having reached a certain level, pours into the next jar, . . . and so on, until the air is full of mysterious music. It must be,' he mused, 'a race memory. Crude, yes; primitive, unquestionably. But derived from the Old People, who used sound in its proper application before Atlantis sank into the sea. Now these things which seem to you to be the pipes of some colossal organ are water-pipes. They are grey only with the incrustations of age, but they are mostly of pure gold. The largest one, which is about the size of five hogsheads, is of massive gold. The next is of silver. The following five are of gold and bronze. There are ninety-three in all. You yourself, Mr Bierce, have written of colours the human eye cannot see, and sounds the human ear cannot hear. You cannot hear the great pipe because it is too deep; and you cannot hear the ninety-third pipe, which is thinner than a pencil, because its note is higher than the squeak of a bat. . . . Now you must take off your clothes and lie down on this pallet. Shut your eyes, open your mouth, and wait while I control the flow.'

I asked: 'What happens now?'

'There are sounds which it is not vouchsafed to man to hear, Mr Bierce. You won't hear them – you will scarcely feel them. Breathe deeply, and let us have done with discussion. Listen and tell me what you hear.'

'I hear,' I said, 'a pouring of water. A tinkling of water

conjoined to something strangely compounded of melody and thunder.'

'Aha! The great pipe fills. Now wait——'

My host held to my lips that bitter, effervescent drink which I so clearly remembered, and then as it were through a veil I sensed an agreeable numbness while, from basso to alto, the pipes made their music. I felt them rather than heard them. The first sensation was in the back of my head, in my *cerebellum*; then it was in my wrists and my elbows, my hips and knees and ankles. Soon, this fabulous vibration, controlled as it was by my host, as it seemed took hold of the front of my throat. If I had the will of ten men I could not have resisted this spell. It is not that I swooned — I very gently became unconscious. It is common knowledge that I am a man of a certain strength of will: I held on to my senses as long as I could; was aware of strange vibrations in all my joints; and finally floated out of the world in a black sleep. The last thing I remember in this gigantic cave was the intolerably thin whistle of the smallest pipe, queerly compounded with the dull thunder of the great pipe. It was as if I were melting.

'— We only want your spirit,' said my host.

I could not speak, but I remember saying within myself: 'I hope you may get it.'

Soon the music died. All I could hear was a sound of water running away. Somebody wrapped me in a soft blanket and I was carried away again, back through those labyrinthine passages, to my bedroom where I fell into a profound slumber. I did not awaken until about noon next day. One of my silent attendants led me to a bath of warm water delicately perfumed with something like sandalwood. Again, they shaved me while I slept. He had laid out a fresh white suit, a fine silk shirt, and a black cravat. Studs, cuff-buttons, and scarf-pin were of matched

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pearls. He was setting the table again, so that I had my choice of a dozen dishes. My host came in when I was dressed. 'Now, Mr Bierce,' said he, 'confess that our treatment is efficacious'

'I never felt so well in all my life,' I said.

'I dare say not. And you will feel better yet. We will not need to repeat yesterday's treatment. Only, after you have taken luncheon and rested a little, I might advise the use of the bottle again. Two or three repetitions, and there will be an end to your asthma. Your rheumatism, sir, you may regard as cured for ever; but if you will allow me I shall have the Seven Sisters repeat the massage every night before you retire, to make you plump and supple. Repose, repose – refresh, refresh! Pray be seated with a good appetite. Will you take a glass of sherry with me? . . . Aha – here, I see, is this saddle of mutton. You must try it. It is of Welsh breed. Do you prefer capers or red-currant jelly? You must eat, Mr Bierce, and relax and be happy. Soon my family (what is left of it) will be here, and then we shall have a real feast, and you shall be one with us. . . . Allow me to serve you . . .'

After we had drunk each other's health he left me. The mutton was excellent. I also ate something which, if it was not real Stilton cheese matured with port wine, was remarkably like it. I opened the cupboard by the door and there, indeed, were my old clothes rejuvenated. Only they had thrown away my old straw sombrero and replaced it with a magnificent Panama lined with green silk. There was my gun cleaned and oiled, and my revolver too; both fully loaded. My machete stood in its scabbard, but they had burnished the leather with a bone, as soldiers in England burnish their bayonet scabbards, so that it shone like glass. For my convenience, my host had placed next to it a walking-stick of some rare jungle vine with a handle of

pure gold in the form of a lizard with emeralds for eyes. So I put on my hat and picked up the stick and prepared to go for a walk.

An attendant conducted me into the open. The air was keen and refreshing. Far below lay the dense and foetid jungle; but up here everything was sweet and fresh. I saw that the house, although it was only one storey high, covered an immense area. Some distance away there stood a smaller, somewhat humbler, house which, as I guessed, was for the servants. Beyond there were erected other buildings, all of that ancient, diamond-hard volcanic stone. From one of these buildings came the braying of an ass. I strolled over. There were horses and mules, all white; and, segregated, a number of white *burros*, all beautifully clean and well fed. I called: 'Hello there, Tonto! ——' and sure enough, my old friend that I had bought for three dollars, blanket and halter and all, came running towards me to be stroked. I spoke to him with affection. 'Well, Tonto, old friend,' said I, 'I believe I owe you a debt of gratitude, little *burro*, because you certainly did me a good turn when you brought me here. Yes, Tonto, you and I must have something in common. A restlessness, eh? Eh, Tonto? A misanthropy? Which, I wonder, is the donkeyest donkey of us two? You must be an ass, you know, to run away from a cosy crib like this to go to Oxoxoco — however virtuous Diego's widow may be. *Hasta luego*, my friend; *hasta la vista*, Tonto.' Then I went slowly back to the house, twirling my stick.

But I was aware of a vague disquiet, which I could not define. My host was waiting for me. He too was wearing a Panama hat, but the handle of his walking-stick was of a translucent glowing red. He saw my curious glance and said: 'It is cut out of a solid ruby. In Paris, say, a ruby like this would be worth a fortune. Here, its value is merely

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symbolic. Here, let us exchange walking-sticks. Carry it in good health, I beg.' He took away my gold-headed stick and pressed into my hand the ruby-headed one. I have seen rubies one-twentieth of the size that were valued at ten thousand dollars. Then, with many compliments he, followed by the two attendants, conducted me to my room, saying: 'You must rest. Yesterday's treatment shakes the very fabric of one's being. You have lived in England; have you acquired the English habit of taking afternoon tea? In any case, it shall be sent up, with buttered toast and cinnamon buns. I want to see you plump and hearty, Mr Bierce, solid and vital, bursting with life. You must not over-exert yourself.'

'I was not, sir. I was only making my courtesies to the *burro* that brought me here.'

'Ah, little Tonto? He is an unpredictable *burro*, that one; temperamental, spasmodically seized with an itch to travel. Please rest, and if there is anything at all that you desire, you have only to ring the bell. But before you lie down –' he beckoned and an attendant brought a cup of that bitter, effervescent stuff '– drink this. It relaxes the nerves, it is good for the blood, and improves the appetite. In a manner of speaking, it loosens and clarifies the spirit.'

I drank it, and lay down. But even as the soporific effect of that draught took hold, disquietude came back. I was on the verge of sleep when I sat up and snapped my fingers, having hit upon the cause of it. Simply, I was too contented – a condition to which I was unaccustomed, and which aroused in me the direst suspicions. Maddeningly incomplete yet indescribably sinister thoughts passed through my mind. In spite of the comforts with which I was surrounded and the charming courtesy and respect with which I was treated, I felt that something, somewhere, was wrong – wrong in a mad, unearthly way.

However, I slept very peacefully and awoke only when the seven masseuses and their cup-bearer came in. Again, when I was massaged and dressed, the attendants brought the table and my host came in, smiling. 'I will wager,' said he, 'that you feel as you look – thirty years younger. I am delighted to see you looking so well, and I hope that you will do justice to the *filet*. My little herd is of interesting stock, part Hereford, part Scottish. I keep it only for my table, of course.'

'I have the appetite of an ostrich,' said I, 'and his digestion too. I am sure that I am getting fat.'

'By the time the rest of my family are gathered here you will be in perfect condition, Mr Bierce. Then we will have a true banquet –' he stopped himself abruptly and added '– of the spirit, of the spirit.' He looked at me with curious intensity and begged me to try an avocado pear with a particularly rich and savoury stuffing.

In spite of my nameless misgivings I ate like a fifteen-year-old boy. My host dined with me; but tonight he seemed to be beset with a kind of neurasthenic lassitude. He said: 'I am in low spirits, this evening. Yes, I am in need of spiritual refreshment . . . Ah well, it will not be long now.' And he poured me a glass of that superlative cognac, saying: 'I will take one glass with you, and then I must sleep, You must rest, too. In a little while they will bring you your draught, and so good-night and pleasant dreams to you.'

But I did not drink my draught that night. I say, I was weary of idleness and contentment, and wanted to think. I drowsed a little, however, and should eventually have slept – but then a frightful thought occurred to me, which jerked me like a hooked fish, cold and wet with panic, into bright consciousness. I remembered what my host had said when he had imitated the accents of the California

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squatter: *Me and my folks sure would admire to have you for supper . . .* and the peculiar expression of veiled mockery that flashed across his face when he said it. Then, I remembered all his talk about the banquet, the impending 'feast of the spirit', and I recalled again certain cannibalistic practices of some ancient races who believe that partaking of a portion of the flesh of a dead friend or enemy, they absorb some of his spiritual and intellectual attributes. And now I began to understand the deadly terror in which the people up here were regarded. Also I perceived for the first time the nature of the pleasant-smelling oil with which I had been so carefully shampooed; I detected in its odour thyme, sage, basil, marjoram, hyssop and mint — herbs, in fact, which belong not to the art of healing, but to the art of cookery. This was enough. . . .

So, to clear my thoughts and to pass the time, I wrote the above in my notebook. I propose, in case I am caught and searched, to roll these thin pages into a tight little scroll and put it where no one will ever think of looking for it: into one of the necks of the inhaler-bottle which stands on my dressing-table. Then I will put on my own clothes, take up my old arms, go to the stable and call the *burro* Tonto. He found his way to Oxoxoco once; he may do so again. One thing is certain: no savage will touch me while I am mounted on his back. And once in the jungle, given a three hours' start, I shall have nothing but thirst to fear. I am reluctant to leave the stick with the ruby head but, although I was born an Ohio farmer's boy, nevertheless I trust I have the instincts of a gentleman. In any case, with my other equipment, I shall find it inconvenient to carry. The moon is setting. Gun, revolver, machete, canteen; and then, to horse.

(Signed) Ambrose Bierce.

May (?) 1914.

And that is the manuscript that was found in the Oxoxoco Bottle. The authorities have been reluctant to publicise it for fear of a hoax. The farce of the Piltdown skull still rankles in many academic minds. But, in my opinion, it is genuine. The holograph is undoubtedly in Ambrose Bierce's writing. The fact that it is no longer the writing of an old man may be attributed to the circumstance that he was relieved of his rheumatism up there, when the man in the white suit was making him 'perfect' for the ghoulis 'spiritual supper'.

But exactly how one of the greatest American writers of his time died we still do not know. It may be – I hope not – that they pursued him and led him and Tonto back. It may be that he died in the jungle. It may be that he reached Oxoxoco and there – as is generally believed – was shot by Pancho Villa. One thing is certain; and that is, that the gentleman in the white suit, his house, his riches, and his tribe were wiped out when Popocatepetl erupted some years later, and now are covered by an unknown depth of hard volcanic rock, so that no solution is to be looked for there.

Still I am convinced that this is the only authentic account of the last days of 'Bitter' Ambrose Bierce.

